

LONG WAYS FROM HOME: THE RHETORIC AND PERFORMANCE OF THE  
AMERICAN FOLK OUTLAW

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study traverses the unsettled outlaw territory that is simultaneously a part of and apart from settled American society by examining outlaw myth, performance, and perception over time. In this study the outlaw figure is de-heroicized and expanded upon in its historical (Jesse James, Billy the Kid), folk (John Henry, Stagolee), and social (tramps, hoboes) forms in order to emphasize the disruptive possibilities of a marginal or outcast existence in performative acts that improvise on tradition. Because the outlaw voice has been most prominent in folk performance since the late nineteenth century, this study focuses on the works and personae of Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan. The performative outlaw is a cultural persona that is invested in outlaw tradition and conflates the historic, folkloric, and social in a cultural act. These three outlaw performers also demonstrate key cultural treatments of the outlaw in the form of the bad man, good man, and honest man.

## DEDICATION

To Lisarooni, Mom, Dad, Matt, Marc, and Barbara Rutherford.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

When this project first began, one of the major questions it sought to answer was similar to a question Woody Guthrie asks in a brief essay from the early 1940s: “Why do people set down and write up great songs and ballads about their outlaws? (And never about governors, mayors, or police chiefs?)” (*Pastures of Plenty* 79-80). Guthrie’s answer, in addition to being characteristic of his philosophy, reflects the Depression-era treatment of the outlaw figure as a populist hero: “an outlaw does one big thing . . . He tries. Tries his best. Dies for what he believes in. Goes down shooting. Politicians don’t try. They shoot the bull and hot air, but they don’t try their best to make the world better” (*Pastures of Plenty* 80). Fair enough. Songs are written and sung about outlaws because they are willing to give their life to make the world better for those whose freedom is threatened by unjust laws or an unfair economic system. This is the portrayal of the outlaw Guthrie grew up with in the oil boom plains and Dust Bowl devastation of Oklahoma and Texas, and this is the outlaw role Guthrie portrayed in his performance persona and songs. It certainly doesn’t take much critical insight to debunk this romantic view of the outlaw, especially if we look at the real lives of “classic” outlaw figures like Jesse James or Billy the Kid. But the real biography of the classic outlaws is not essentially what this project is interested in, nor is it particularly interested in debunking the myths of the outlaw figure. This is not to say that the biographies and mythic structures of the outlaw should not be and are not considered in this study. Getting to the

root, the facts and the contexts from which traditional and mythic systems grow, brings to light much that is often glossed over or forgotten over time in rigid traditions and dominant myths.

Take John Henry for example. A folkloric tradition that became an enduring myth sung about for over a century, Henry's epic battle against the machine is certainly full of a rich and perplexing ambiguity that is often lost when it's read merely in a positive light. Taking the tale as a whole, we might consider a number of readings: is John Henry's victory over the steam drill a story representing the American will to succeed, an affirmation of the primacy and necessity of human labor in an increasingly urban-industrial society, or a cautionary tale of the dangers of overwork or hubris? Certainly, we don't have to settle on reading the story strictly in one way, nor should we. In addition to these broader questions, we might consider some more direct issues concerning the man, his family, and situation. Why is it that even as a baby, as the tale tells, John Henry knew he was going to die with that hammer in his hand? What about the son Henry left behind just to prove "a man ain't nothin' but a man"? Moreover, what about Polly Ann, the wife he left behind who took up that hammer after his death? Certainly considering these details more fully could lead to some very lively critical interpretation of the story. Is Polly Ann, the steel-driving woman, Rosie the Riveter's mythical mother?

It doesn't take much digging under the surface to get at the complexity of Henry's tale. The lasting place the ballad has had in American culture is partly due to this complex ambiguity even if much of it is masked in heroic battle. Digging even



deeper, as Scott Reynolds Nelson has recently done, reveals the lost fact that John Henry was a black convict hired out to the railroad who was not swinging his famous hammer by choice. He was an outlaw (in custody) even if, perhaps, he isn't what we might think of as a typical outlaw. It might be said that John Henry's story is one of the most successful tales of the folk outlaw tradition because his outlaw roots were masked completely by heroism in popular culture. Unlike tales of Jesse James or Billy the Kid, who only enjoy a partial masking of heroism at different times in history because we are always aware that they're outlaws (their roots are always showing), John Henry's roots were firmly "buried in the sand." Time, memory, and popular consumption erased the prison walls of the "white house" where John Henry was buried in an anonymous mass grave. How does this forgotten fact then add to the already complex story? And this also gives rise to another significant question: what does it mean that the only seemingly positive, non-violent black folk hero had been de-outlawed in popular culture very early in his career? These are two questions we will return to.

Getting to the root of myths and traditions (which are essentially more ritualized mythic systems) can reinvigorate the liveliness of such systems of understanding and defining the world around us, our culture and society. Without this reinvigoration, myth and tradition lose their capacity to play, discover, and remain open. They become static, closed systems, which often results in cultural stagnation and with this stagnation, the means to justify exclusion, oppression, dispossession, and, at its worst, extermination. Fascism is perhaps the most striking evidence of this in the twentieth century, but it's the same closure by which American expansion and manifest destiny justified removal and

extermination of Native Americans and by which disenfranchisement of African Americans, as well as the widespread social, cultural, and political outlawing or outcasting of countless others, was made possible. Yet, tradition and myth need not and should not be abandoned despite these cultural malignancies. “[W]ithout myth,” Nietzsche writes, “every culture forfeits its healthy, natural creative force: only a horizon defined by myths completes the unity of a whole cultural movement” (*Birth of Tragedy* 122). It is not, then, that we need to debunk or dispel myth and tradition, nor should we blindly or romantically accept them: both methods might be comparatively considered the result of forfeiture of social and cultural growth; an unhealthy, oppressive, and destructive cultural force. Rather, myth and tradition should be treated as creative cultural forces. Getting to the roots of these forces in a case like John Henry—the fact that he was a black convict contracted out to the railroad rather than working willingly—opens our understanding of how these cultural forces work, perpetuate, and are co-opted by various groups in ways that either appreciate the myth’s liveliness or adapt and stifle it to their own ends, wittingly or not. To this end, this study will consider outlaw biographies, mythic structures, and traditions in order to understand how individual outlaws “performed” a role, how the public received that performance and created from this reception, and how the liveliness of the folk outlaw tradition makes all of this possible. For the folk outlaw tradition is anything but static.

## The Bad, the Good, and the Honest: An Overview of Outlaw Ethics

The very nature of the outlaw figure resists definition and wholesale fixity even if the complicated figure demonstrates an interior impulse toward integration (and there always is as we'll see in the various ways the outlaw is tied to notions of "home") and an exterior force of public consumption acting upon the outlaw to make him socially and culturally acceptable. The former force we might liken to settling down or "going straight," and the latter force we might characterize as a cultural pardon. But in the archetypal outlaw's case, integration or acceptance—interiorly or externally—is transitory. It has to be. Otherwise, symbolically, the outlaw is no longer a disruptive, creative force, no longer an outlaw, and an agent of change, personally or socially. That the outlaw is never fully integrated or accepted is demonstrated by the various ways his cultural role and treatment has changed and shifted over time. From his cultural birth in the late nineteenth century, the modern American folk outlaw figure has played many roles for many different groups, roles shifting in various degrees between a moral dialectic of "good" and "bad" for much of his history until the Second World War.

In a sense, the social and cultural treatment of the outlaw figure has served as a barometer for the times. If the outlaw was treated as a "good man" outside the law by Woody Guthrie and various groups during the Depression, he wasn't necessarily seen this way at other times. For instance, while Jesse James enjoyed a "good man" outlaw image similar to Robin Hood during his outlaw career and in the years following his death in the late nineteenth century, by the turn of the century this popular treatment

shifted. During this time American society was in a moral panic and calling for widespread social reform. As a result, the dime novel industry that helped to create the mythic good man image of the James brothers was pressured to discontinue their popular James novels because it was feared that the romantic treatment of the outlaws and their violent ways corrupted the youth. The “good man” James became the “bad man” James, joining Billy the Kid who never got to play the good man role until the good man “revival” of the Depression era.

It was also at the turn of the century that the African American bad man tradition—arguably a development from slave trickster tales—became prominent with figures like John Hardy and the infamous Stagolee, both of whom stand in distinct contrast with John Henry’s heroics, but were nevertheless treated as cultural heroes. Blues or folk performers that emerged during this time embodied this ambivalence in lifestyle and performance, shaping a tradition that would characterize Huddie Ledbetter’s (Lead Belly) performance persona and popular reception. Lead Belly was never able fully to shed his image as a violent bad man during his life, particularly because his initial popular reception in the early 1930s, which formed the dominant basis of the Lead Belly legend, was so integrally established through this role. During the late thirties and early forties, the most productive years of the Popular Front and first folk revival, however, his performance of the role involved a social consciousness that the traditional bad man figure apparently lacked. Or rather, his performance brought the social problems that helped to create the traditional bad man figure to the surface. Richard Wright, who befriended Lead Belly in 1937 and interviewed him for the *Daily*

*Worker* that year (August 12, 1937), gives us perhaps the most archetypal representation of the bad man during this time with his Bigger Thomas and the painstaking way *Native Son* (1940) attempts to understand the social conditions that precipitated Bigger's crime.

A similar shift in outlaw representation was also happening with Guthrie's good man outside the law, emphasizing the roots of discontent rather than the actions of the discontented. In the Depression-era representation of the folk outlaw, then, we do not merely see a return of the late-nineteenth-century good man or the ambivalently romanticized bad man, but the beginnings of a complex hybrid of the two that dispenses with simple moral judgment of the outlaw by culture and society in favor of the outlaw serving as a representative critique of the American culture and society that created these outlaws or necessitated their actions. On the surface, the Depression-era good man outlaw—really, a socially-conscious bad man—kept intact the moral dialectic of good and bad even as it shifted the focus of moral judgment more fully to address the roots of social and cultural problems. As it was at the end of the nineteenth century when Jesse James—not even posthumously, but while he was still alive—was first treated as a modern Robin Hood, the root of these Depression-era problems often found form in the figure of corrupt politicians, businessmen, and agents of the law. Underneath this simple dialectic of the good man fighting for the powerless against the bad men who held the power, however, was an increasingly broader critique of the national systems these powerful bad men inside the law represented.

This broader critique would leave behind emphasis on the good/bad moral dialectic altogether, shifting the role of the outlaw in American culture yet again as

figured in the “honest man” outlaw of the post-WWII era whose ethically-rooted role continued to shift through the 1970s. The distinction between morality and ethics is important. Whereas morality is something akin to rigid tradition (especially religious law), wherein it represents accepted social and cultural norms and judges deviations harshly, ethics, while sometimes viewed in a similar way, is the study of morality: it questions the authority of moral systems. This is not to say that ethics itself is a disinterested study of social and cultural morals. Because ethics involves principles that can be argued or disputed, some type of judgment is necessary, and it’s necessary to take into account who is doing the judging. A perfect example is those famous inalienable rights of the *Declaration of Independence*. If life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are widely recognized as the ethical founding principles of America, they are not as widely understood unquestionably or upheld uniformly. It is in this sense that the post-WWII ethically-rooted outlaw goes beyond the moral critique of representatives of power and law and engages in an ethical critique of not only the individual systems that they represent (such as law, economics, politics, etc.), but also more explicitly critiques notions of American nationhood and identity, the national myths and traditions that created the social and cultural norms. Yet, the honest man outlaw should not be considered a more enlightened good man. His critique as honest self-evaluation in representation and performance has little to do with goodness or badness. While honesty generally may be considered a “good” or admirable trait, inherently it’s an amoral evaluative position. One does not have to be “good” to be honest. The honest man outlaw is represented as just as flawed as the systems he critiques in his performance. In

many ways he represents a national unconscious that honestly engages with its tragic flaws where recognition (and perhaps acceptance) takes precedence over justification. Moreover, the honest man outlaw represents the perpetual tension between the individual and the collective in the context of an American democratic and capitalist ideology drastically thrust under the microscope in a paranoiac Cold War society. The symbolic alienation of the outlaw was an explicit representation of the social, cultural, and political alienation of the time.

Thus, during this time we see Jesse James in a film like Nicholas Ray's *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), who begins his outlaw career feeling wholly justified, but soon becomes more of a consumed rebel without a cause disingenuously trying to desperately secure a stable domestic life. And we see Billy the Kid in a film like Arthur Penn's *The Left Handed Gun* (1958) as an illiterate, emotionally unstable kid who is unable to "put away childish things" to avenge an unrealistically adopted father figure while simultaneously facing the more believable father figure of his former friend Pat Garrett. In both cases, representations of James and the Kid demonstrate how a seemingly ideal notion of justice and domestic norms becomes a grotesque growth of homicidal vengeance, a trend that perhaps finds its apotheosis in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) with the maniacal massacre that occurs at the end of the movie, spurred by the torture and murder of the youngest of the bunch, whose hometown briefly adopted the gang as their own. But integral to our understanding of the honest representation of James' and the Kid's violent flaws is the concurrent theme of popular myth construction that is addressed in Ray's and Penn's films. In both cases,

representatives of popular culture—newspapers and dime novels—are portrayed as creating and/or enforcing the public myth of these outlaws, one that popular culture can't get enough of, but in turn confines the outlaws to their mythic role and precipitates a grotesquery of the values they supposedly represent.<sup>1</sup> Their actions become dishonest because they're spurred by a socially- and culturally-constructed framework rather than by individual will.

While it's tempting to consider the representative shifts of the American folk outlaw figure from a good/bad moral dialectic to an ethically-rooted honest evaluation as a progressive evolution, to do so would neglect to consider the characteristics of the outlaw that make him continuously culturally appealing for better or worse. To do so would also create artificial boundaries in the outlaw's heritage, disconnect him from his predecessors and those who follow. The good/bad moral dialectic may have been dominant in the performances of Lead Belly and Guthrie, but this is not to say that there

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<sup>1</sup> Ray's film goes a step further in addressing the public consumption/creation of the outlaw by including a folk singer who sings the famous ballad of Jesse James after James is killed. Surprisingly, the ballad is the most honest popular representation of James in the movie because the singer does not sing the most popular verses of the ballad treating James as a modern Robin Hood, but re-affirms James' outlaw status and his disconnectedness from "normal" society—a theme that's central to Ray's treatment of James and reinforced by the fact that the singer is poor, blind and black—with these verses:

Jesse James was a man who lived outside the law  
And no one knew his face  
He was killed on day in the county of Clay  
And he came from a solitary race

Jesse came to an end with his back turned to a friend  
A friend he thought was brave  
And the dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard  
And laid poor Jesse in his grave



isn't an element of ethical critique implicit in their work or even in the very beginnings of the modern outlaw figure. Guthrie's outlaw American anthem, "This Land is Your Land," which highlights the disparity between America's democratic ideals and the reality of their exclusion, is a good case in point. Nor is there a complete absence of the good/bad moral dialectic in the ethically-rooted outlaw. Bob Dylan, whose work engages with the tension or disparity between the self-legislated individual and the socially- and culturally-constructed role that's evident in representations of the honest man outlaw, never completely abandons speaking in moral terms even as he highlights the importance of individual ethics. In a 1981 interview, sixteen years after he composed "Like a Rolling Stone," a song that highlights the benefit of self-honesty and how it's tied to being a social outcast, Dylan comments on the "classic" outlaws he grew up with:

I grew up admiring those type [sic] of heroes, Robin Hood, Jesse James ... the person who always kicked against the oppression and ... had high moral standards. I don't know if the people I write about have high moral standards, I don't know if Robin Hood did, but you always assumed that they did ... I think what I intend to do is just show the individualism of that certain type of breed.

("Dylan London Interview")

Integral to Dylan's understanding of the outlaw is the archetypal/classic figure of the outlaw, which he does not merely leave behind in favor of a new understanding, but improvises upon. In this manner, the outlaw figure is not seen as evolutionary—which fixes the various outlaw types in specific times and contexts, fragmenting understanding of the outlaw into a more rigid tradition— but as a mercurial, lively, and shifting form

that always retains a set of characteristics and values that make him appealing to many different groups at different times.

### Making it Live: Improvisation on Tradition and Crossroad Commerce

This study treats the myth of the folk outlaw as a living tradition or an improvisation on tradition, a conceptual framework that is meant to be ambiguous, paradoxical, and ambivalent, welcoming the creative tension between freedom and fixity while highlighting the performative role of the outlaw negotiating the shifting line—shifting because there are as many lines as there are degrees and contexts of freedom and fixity—between the two. By considering both forces of freedom and fixity—represented by improvisational performance and tradition—as integral to the outlaw’s social and cultural performative liveliness we recognize that the root of improvisation (freedom) lies in tradition (fixity) while the root of tradition likewise springs from some past improvisation. In essence, the two share the same root no matter how antithetical they may seem to be. The classic modernist version of this idea is Ezra Pound’s motto, “make it new,” and finds its most instructive representation in his poem “A Pact,” where Pound comes to an understanding with Walt Whitman, who he has “detested long enough” (2).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It may be argued that T. S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is just as pertinent in this argument, and for the most part it is. Where it doesn’t particularly fit in with this argument is that the individual is presented as more of a passive medium, rather than the performing/active individual we see in Pound.

Now that Pound has matured enough as a writer he can make not just a peace, but a “pact” with the bard of the open road who “broke the new wood,” and “Now is a time for carving, / We have one sap and one root— / Let there be commerce between us” (6-9). While this mythic meeting between Whitman and Pound may serve as a handy metaphor for our consideration of the outlaw performer’s improvisation on tradition, let’s also consider another mythic meeting on the open road that leads to a pact in commerce.

The crossroad tale made famous in the myths surrounding the blues musician Robert Johnson may have been, in its modern form, his own creation (or Tommy Johnson’s), or it may more likely have been an improvisation on the outlaw persona of the bluesman that emerged around the turn of the century. As many scholars have noted, the roots of this myth can be traced back to a number of African/African-derived ritual and religious forms, particularly the Fon trickster Legba (or the similar Yoruba trickster Eshu), whose “home” is at the crossroads (or any “threshold” place) and who serves as mediator, helps to precipitate a creative (or destructive) commerce, a negotiation, between things or worlds that are antithetical such as heaven and earth or chance and fate. For now, consideration of the modern crossroad myth will do to demonstrate the outlaw performer’s negotiation of the tension between improvisation (freedom) and tradition (fixity). The musician who journeys to the crossroads to make a pact with the devil at the stroke of midnight, selling his soul in exchange for unearthly or charmed talent, may take that talent and travel in any direction from that crossroad. He’s free to perform wherever and whatever he pleases, but he’s still essentially fixed in that

placeless crossroad with the devil; at least, his soul is. What we might call his “curse” is not that he sells his soul, but that he’s fixed in placelessness, never able to settle down in any “normal” way. As with all myths, there’s a lesson here.

On the surface, yes, it’s important to read the devil as the Devil, especially in the context of blues music and the contemporary Southern, African-American culture in the early twentieth century, which considered this more individualistic type of music as “sinful,” opposing the traditional spiritual and religiously-centered music of the community. And many blues performers wrestled with this tension, particularly Charlie Patton, one of the founders of delta blues, who struggled throughout his life with inclinations toward religious vocation and his desire to play “sinful” music and live the life associated with this music. Rock and Roll would also translate this moral dialectic into its attitude and myths. Jerry Lee Lewis struggled with the same issues as Patton. When Robert Palmer asked Lewis why he thought he was going to hell when he died, Lewis responded, without irony, “I can’t picture Jesus Christ . . . doin’ a whole lotta shakin’” (qtd. in Palmer, *Blues and Chaos* 154). Reading the devil as a sinful force opposed to religious piety, then, does give us a good sense of the context in which blues as a cultural form emerged while also emphasizing the individualistic outlaw role assumed in choosing to perform this music. But this context is shaded with a moral judgment that hinders understanding of what’s really at stake in this myth—ambivalently constructed as it is, which is important because we need to recognize that the myth exists because it’s culturally appealing and that the very tension in this moral dialectic is part of what gives the music its force. Setting aside this moral/religious context reveals a

moment of creative commerce occurring between an ordering force and a disruptive or outlaw force—a liminal moment (between night and day) in a threshold, non-place where freedom and fixity, outlaw and law, improvisation and tradition intersect and everything is up for grabs, where chance and possibility are welcomed and acted upon by the willing individual.

What goods does this moment of commerce deal in? Of course, in the blues myth the immediate answer is musical talent, just as literary talent would be the immediate commerce of Pound's pact after he forgoes his earlier detestation of Whitman (note the implicit moral/aesthetic judgment in Pound's choice of "detested"). But what is at the root of this talent in general? The intersection, the crossroad, the commerce of tradition and improvisation creates something new. Unexplainably new, inhuman, or unearthly talent (that is, talent viewed as not normal, not status quo, not traditional, not explainable by any existing everyday narrative, as in the legend surrounding Johnson) furthers the tradition through improvisation, preserves tradition's liveliness. At the root of the specific goods of commerce—the specific talent—is the opening of creative possibility, a dealing in chance. Elvis Presley's breakthrough recording of bluesman Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup's "That's Alright, Mama" at Sun Studio in 1954 is a good example of this crossroad moment of commerce in chance and nearly as mythic as the crossroad tale itself.

The numerous accounts of the recording emphasize its creation as a moment of chance. The recording session had been unproductive with Elvis performing traditional country music. It was *between* takes that chance and possibility were fully accepted.

Elvis began playing the blues-inspired arrangement of “That’s Alright, Mama,” literally playing, performatively “acting the fool” (as Scotty Moore comments), having fun to fill the time before attempting another take of standard country music (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 95). The up-tempo beat and Presley’s vocals were infectious, inspiring Bill Black to begin “acting the fool” on bass with Moore joining in on guitar soon after (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 95). The result of this moment of improvisation was the first Elvis recording that really impressed producer Sam Phillips, who had the trio record the arrangement immediately. With the spirit of this improvisation, a melding, a chance exchange of country and blues—socially-distinctive white and black musical traditions at the time rather than the mere empty genres we have now—the trio also recorded Bill Monroe’s “Blue Moon of Kentucky” in a similar style a few days later. The single that Phillips released of these two songs would become the signpost of the crossroad from which Elvis (and popular rock and roll music in general) would begin his journey.<sup>3</sup> It’s fitting, then, that the present-day tour of Sun Studio marks the spot where Elvis stood with an “X” taped to the floor. It’s a mark as unassuming and open to chance (anyone can stand in that spot) as that moment of improvisation that became a tradition to build

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that Elvis was the first to incorporate blues with country. Popular consumption and mythology do, however, make it seem like this is the case. Jimmie Rodgers (as well as the Carter Family) was perhaps the first significantly popular country (when it was called hillbilly) artist to do so, just as many blues musicians incorporated country or folk in their music. Even Robert Johnson is said to have enjoyed playing Rodgers’ songs. But commerce between white and black musical traditions has been taking place in America since the seventeenth century. Needless to say, the distinct segregation of the two is more the result of social, cultural, and commercial delineation, rather than musical. Two excellent inquiries into the actual commerce between the musical traditions and their segregation are Ronald Radano’s *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (2003) and Karl Hagstrom Miller’s *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (2010).

upon. It present an opportunity for the commerce to continue, as suggested by the tale the Sun Studio tour guide tells about Bob Dylan's visit to the studio. Dylan reputedly knelt down and kissed that unassuming "X".

True or not, Dylan's homage, or perhaps, recognition of his own commerce with Elvis, demonstrates a sort of indebtedness that occurs in the crossroad pact. It's only indebtedness in the sense that something needs to be exchanged for commerce to occur. Exchange also insures a sense of complicity, a self-willed acceptance of something like duty, a commitment, but mutual. Accepting something without exchange, without recognizing the need for exchange, carries a debt that isn't self-willed: it's an obligation. Or, conversely, if nothing is exchanged there is the possibility that what is given will be wasted or taken for granted because there's no personal investment (perhaps the biblical parable of the talents is apropos here). So what is exchanged for the ability to escape fate and tradition (fixity) in a moment of possibility and improvisation (freedom) in crossroad commerce? This brings us back to the myth of Robert Johnson selling his soul to the devil. What does it mean to exchange one's soul? Does Pound offer his soul to Whitman in commerce? No doubt Whitman might find a soul exchange appealing, particularly commerce between body and soul. Does Elvis give up his soul in that ludic moment? Certainly, Bill Black and Scotty Moore considered the possibility that they had damned themselves, commenting, "[G]ood God, they'll run us outa town when they hear it" (Hopkins 73). Exiles who sold their soul or the new big thing in music? And here's the ambivalence of selling or exchanging your soul for the chance to create something new: you might just change the status quo.

In his speech for inducting Bob Dylan into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Bruce Springsteen speaks as a beneficiary of the crossroad commerce we've been discussing: "Bob freed your mind the way Elvis freed your body" (287). If freedom is the received gift or legacy of those who benefit from the performance of folk outlaws then how are we to interpret selling one's soul in the crossroad myth? Does the outlaw give something up for the benefit of others, as Guthrie's comment at the beginning of this chapter suggests? Or maybe the outlaw, rather than sacrificing himself for the benefit of others, bears the possibility of damnation by the status quo in order to assert his own freedom, which the public consequently finds appealing if the circumstances are right. Or perhaps, as in the case of the bad man outlaw, if already condemned by society, does the outlaw assert himself simply in order to be seen and heard, acting not as a spokesman for the people, nor a role model, but as a reminder to the socially and culturally outlawed that self-willed action can't be taken away by or become meaningless in any system, no matter how oppressive? The key to all of these possibilities is freedom, which is at the very root of the outlaw's appeal, and the various ways that this freedom can be interpreted is at the root of this study. But we are still faced with the issue of trading on one's soul: what it actually means, and how the exchange of one's soul in commerce can almost paradoxically lead to freedom.

To better understand the dynamic of this crossroad commerce, we need to be open to the fact that trading your soul is not always damning, especially if it leads to some form of freedom, but we also mustn't lose sight of the fact that something *must* be left behind, given up. It's not that giving one's soul is damning in a moral/religious



sense, but that something of the self is given up in the process: a common expression (that for some reason is often the response after something is rejected and/or misunderstood) of this is pouring one's heart and soul into something. In everyday life, socially and culturally, giving up one's soul is often interpreted morally or idealistically because any threat to the autonomous self is viewed as a stricture of freedom. You give up your soul and you give up part of your freedom. But then again, this is only the case when the trade is made with a person, institution, or force that is deemed socially and culturally aberrant or "bad." Trading your soul to the Devil is bad. Giving your soul to God is good. Yet, in these extreme examples it is not the actual meaning of investing one's soul that is judged, but the moral ends of this investment. At root in this commerce, the actual act, however, in a symbolically amoral space like the crossroad, is fully investing one's self in a performance, an investment in the subjunctivity (a state of being open to possibility rather than a morally indicative one) of the liminal performative space that is only fixed or defined by individual actions in relation to and improvisation on traditional structures. And in the end, in the full investment of the self, the soul never dies. It keeps performing long after the body is gone, which is why myths like Johnson at the crossroad or Elvis "acting the fool" in that liminal space, engaging in a musical tradition that Sam Phillips characterized as "where the soul of a man never dies," continue to have cultural performative force (qtd. in Guralnick, *Last Train* 95). "Like Joe Hill," the Wobbly folk outlaw performer executed by firing squad in 1915, who has never really "died" because his ghost (and "message") lives on in song, Peter

Guralnick writes, “in a sense, Robert Johnson never died; he simply became an idea” (*Searching* 63).

If we are to interpret the act of trading on one’s soul in the crossroad myth as a self-willed investment in the full *possibility* (rather than the socially- and culturally-constructed strictures) of performance at the juncture of improvisation (freedom) and tradition (fixity), it’s still necessary to account for the devil’s presence, the role he plays in this myth. To suggest that he only represents a moral judgment would mask the full implication of the myth and why it’s so representative of the outlaw’s social and cultural role. Rather, the devil’s presence as both mediator of freedom and fixity and agent of commerce is a recognition of the necessary investment in the performative act, that which must be given up, and the possibility of social and cultural damnation that must accompany the act. There is always this possibility as there is always the possibility of being blessed. Here we have the ambiguity and tension between freedom and fixity, improvisation and tradition: to disrupt by performative act is to stand outside, marginalize oneself, become an outlaw (if not one already) who might be run out of town, exiled, damned by the system that’s disrupted, but in doing so a self-legislated, self-defining freedom is asserted. Regardless if one is already considered an outlaw or becomes such in the act, this self-legislated freedom is asserted in the act. In the former case, this freedom represents a self-willed performance of the outlaw status—active participation—rather than the passive outcast role assigned by society. In either case, it’s this possibility of freedom and disrupting the status quo or even a quotidian existence that makes the outlaw so socially and culturally appealing in all of his manifestations.

Keeping in mind the performative liveliness of this project's conceptual framework of improvisation on tradition, then, we witness at certain social and cultural crossroads in American history the outlaw selling—or “investing” in the fullest sense of the word's implication of performance, clothing oneself in the self-willed authority of performance, assuming and disguising oneself in a role—his soul again and again, opening himself to chance, each time taking a different direction: maybe negotiating a path to freedom, rambling down old dusty roads, or sometimes revisiting the same highway other outlaws have gone down as a by-way to new possibilities. During Guthrie's time the outlaw may have been the good man, but years earlier he might have been the bad man as evidenced by Lead Belly's case, or years later, he might have been the honest man as we see in Bob Dylan's work. The structure of this study highlights these performances of improvisation on tradition by first exploring the shifting traditions of the folk outlaw in a broad historical context (Chapter II) and then more specifically examining the performance of the outlaw role in the context of the uncanniness of the outlaw and folk music milieu that Greil Marcus characterizes as the Old, Weird America, the outlaw territory always present—just under the surface—in American culture and society (Chapter III). And from establishing these contexts, we'll look more closely at three improvisers on this outlaw tradition: Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. Up to this point, we may have a better understanding of the outlaw's cultural and social performative role as a type of improviser on tradition, approaching a foundation upon which to base the folk outlaw's appeal over time. We still need to consider, however, the essential matter of understanding who or what the outlaw is.

## What Is an Outlaw?

Before Woody Guthrie can even entertain the question of why people write songs about outlaws, he must first ask, “What is an outlaw? A person that breaks the law?” But the answer isn’t so simple, as Guthrie suggests: “There’s lots of laws, too many. The world is full of laws and the jails are full of people” (*Pastures of Plenty* 79). Part of the reason for the folk outlaw’s liveliness, perplexity, and inherent portrayal as highly performative is because of the difficulty in defining who or what an outlaw is. The outlaw’s unwillingness to remain within the bounds of a static definition, while often *appearing* to be playing a traditional role, points to a source of the outlaw’s performative force. If an outlaw, however, is defined by the sole fact that he or she breaks a law, then a good majority of us could be called outlaws, at one time or another, for “the world is full of laws,” and not just legal laws, but also social, cultural, and economic.

Already, we’re navigating murky waters in order to answer what might seem to be a simple question. Not only must we qualify an outlaw status as resulting from something more than just breaking the law, but a definition of “law” is also necessary. In and of itself, “law” might be simply defined as the rules and guidelines established and enforced by institutions that govern individuals as social beings. Those who break these rules and guidelines, as a stock definition of the outlaw suggests, face the possibility of situating themselves outside the benefits and protection of the law. But real life isn’t as clear-cut as this, and the figure of the outlaw (and “the law” itself) carries much more social, cultural, and mythical/ideological weight. It’s doubtful that we would call a

loiterer in a “no loitering” area an outlaw. And even if we add a social significance to a type of loitering—say, Rosa Parks refusing to leave her seat—the term “outlaw” is rarely, if ever, invoked to describe this transgression. Throw in an act of violence in asserting one’s right to remain where one believes they have a right to be, even though “the law” deems differently, however, and “outlaw” seems a fitting word, but it’s still problematic if one considers Native Americans. This is not to say that because convention does not consider all of these acts in terms of being an “outlaw” that they are not outlaw acts or that we cannot interpret the agents in these acts as outlaws.

As telling as these distinctions may be—particularly the potential factor of violence (one might say, the highest degree of performing an act) being integral to conceiving of the archetypal outlaw figure—of the conventional ways society and culture characterize transgression of laws, they suggest that the outlaw is not simply one who breaks the law, that there is something else inherent in the term “outlaw” (in addition to its social and cultural formation) and the role the figure plays in society. What is an outlaw, then, if transgression of law is not the only criteria by which we define the outlaw? How is it possible to consider artists like Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan as performers of the outlaw role or social activists like Rosa Parks and even the founders of America as outlaws without the suggestion seeming tenuous, contrived, and simply a matter of nominal fallacy? How is it useful to view them in the performative role that we generally associate with classic outlaws like Jesse James and Billy the Kid? Rather than approaching this issue as a problem of defining the outlaw, this study is concerned with what it means *to be* an outlaw. And in addressing the

question of what an outlaw *is*, it's necessary to forgo the restrictive practice of defining the outlaw as a static form in favor of considering the outlaw as a mode of existence, a performative state of *being*: one that exists in the liminal, marginal, and outcast "placeless" spaces of culture and society. Of course, distinguishing among different types or performative "roles" of outlaws can help us to understand better the characteristics of this outlaw state of being. But before doing so we need to consider the roots of the word/idea "outlaw" and how its root is inexorably tied to an individual's state of being or worth in relation to society.

Following the etymological roots of "outlaw," Frank Richard Prassel traces the social origins of the American outlaw figure's lineage back to the fifth- and sixth-century British Isles. Before there was an established legal system, the concept of justice that was upheld was one of "approved vengeance, by and against the clan as well as the individual" (Prassel 3). During this time "a freeman's status and value, or worth, was called his *laga*" (Prassel 3). Because "[r]etribution was the foundation of the law," if an accused murderer escaped retribution he would become "*utlagutus*, a term which eventually was transformed into the word *outlaw*," someone who had lost their position as a freeman and their worth as deemed by the clan (Prassel 3). Thus at the very root of the concept of the outlaw is a question of one's social value or worth. If society views an individual as an outlaw, then, the individual is seen as both worthless and no longer "free" within that society. But what about the individual's own sense of worth or freedom? Is worth contingent *only* upon the judgment of society? Clearly, no individual would entirely accept this summation. Without bogging ourselves down too deeply in

the mire of considering the ontological issues of being and worth we can at least recognize that there is essentially intrinsic worth in all being—that everyone has a life to live—and that social, cultural, and political judgment of worth is something much different: it’s constructed by their very structure and dominant values. If it isn’t the case that worth can exist in some way independently of social value, there would be no foundation for the existence of the self-legislated individual, much less any hope that freedom (as anything but an idealistic social safety-valve) is even possible. In a sense, we might see this as the appeal at the root of the outlaw figure: that the outlaw is not worthless by his own standards, and while being made worthless by society he potentially makes, or rather enacts or performs, his own worth and being outside it and by doing so challenges what society defines as worthy.

And yet, recognizing the intrinsic worth in being ought to be (and is, idealistically, anyway) the foundation of a system of social justice (i.e. the inalienable rights as the foundation for the *Declaration of Independence*). The problem arises when one is viewed as not part of the dominant society and being/worth is predicated upon membership or, more appropriately, citizenship rather than the very fact of existence. But, to suggest that an outlaw can assert his or her own worth independent of society would be wrong. Those who are outlawed need society, at least as an implied relationship even if that relationship is, in a sense, dissolved. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it’s a “negative” relationship, in that it is one of separation rather than integration, but still implies a connection. I would argue, and as the countless favorable treatments throughout history and cultural appeal of the outlaw role as a performative

persona seems to suggest, that society needs its outlaws as well. The outlaw serves society and culture as figurative foil both in the negative and positive sense and not because the existence of the outlaw being is strictly a legal and symbolic reinforcement of the dominant culture and society in its “otherness,” but that the existence of the outlaw being is a recognition that one can act against the dominant force, that a very real freedom is possible in action if not entirely in existence.

But a distinction needs to be made that’s already apparent in this discussion. There are many different kinds of outlaws, some we don’t even think of as outlaws, but outlaws nonetheless. A reason why we might not think of some of these outlaws as outlaws is because they are not outlaws by direct act of breaking the law. Thus we need to distinguish between what we might call the positive and negative modes of being an outlaw similar to the positive and negative relationship the outlaw has with society.

The positive outlaw mode of being is one in which the subject is essentially a self-willed outlaw by breaking the law (legal, social, or cultural) or by performing a transgressive act that disrupts the status quo. The classic examples of this type of outlaw are people like Jesse James and Billy the Kid and later, characterized in the classic form, Pretty Boy Floyd. Essentially, it’s the positive outlaw in the classic sense that assumes the role of the conventional referent for “outlaw.” Mythology and folklore provide us with many other examples of archetypal positive outlaws, an archetype which could be argued as providing the framework for the mythic construction of real-life modern outlaws such as James, the Kid, and Floyd. In Greek mythology we have Prometheus stealing fire for humans and Hermes transgressing Apollo’s law and thereby changing it.



We see transgressive patterns like this across cultures in various mythologies. As noted earlier, there's the figure of the West African tricksters Eshu and Legba that are a part of this positive outlaw tradition, as well as the Native American trickster figures coyote and raven. In fact, all of these mythological figures are of the trickster type that resonates in the construction of modern outlaw personae. A good example of this resonance is Robin Hood, who is often invoked in reference to Jesse James, but who possibly stems from the trickster tradition as a type of forest spirit. Similar trickster lineages can be traced to American folk outlaws such as Stagolee and John Henry as well. Finally, we mustn't forget the non-traditional positive outlaw who performs the role by choice, invests themselves in it, such as we saw with Robert Johnson or Elvis Presley and will consider more closely in the following chapters on Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan.

The negative outlaw is constructed when one is treated as an outlaw neither by choice or act, but simply by one's physical and social state of being. For instance, in an extreme case of the outlaw in the negative sense, there was no volition involved in the enslavement of African Americans and their subjection to laws based on race. Nor was there any volition on the part of Native Americans who were forcibly removed from their homelands, forced onto reservations, or exterminated. This is not to suggest, however, that the negative outlaw does not have any agency. In fact, it's rather telling that even though people in cases like these are treated like outlaws based on nothing but their physical and cultural difference, they aren't generally labeled outlaws until they perform transgressive acts. For example, slaves were only legally outlawed when their worth as a slave was forfeited by acts such as murder, theft, and escape. Strangely, it's

not until they break the law that their agency is recognized by the dominant society and culture. The outlaw in the negative sense can be extended to any person or group whose rights are restricted not because of their acts but because of who they are, such as women, immigrants, and homosexuals. Even the homeless, jobless, and poverty-stricken may be included in the negative sense as fully demonstrated in the “tramp scare” of the late nineteenth century and the treatment of migrant workers and dust bowl refugees of the 1930s and 40s. Although these latter states of economic being are less extreme because they may be transitory, they still fall under the condition of forces potentially out of one’s control and can certainly lead to more extreme measures of oppression based on biological terms such as the movement to sterilize portions of the population deemed to be degenerate during the rise of eugenics.

Even though we can distinguish between the positive and negative modes of outlaw being, we cannot separate one from the other. Both the positive and negative senses of outlaw existence co-exist in the general figure of the outlaw. For instance, for a good part of the modern outlaw’s existence, the idea of the outlaw has relied heavily on the concept of the self-willed individual; the outlaw, like the archetypal American rugged individualist, lives life on his own terms and, in turn, expresses his unhindered freedom in this manner. But in the stories of outlaws, especially the “good man” versions of these stories, the outlaw never “chooses” to be an outlaw, never acts to this end, but is prompted to by some outside force such as corrupt law, powerful railroad companies or land barons, banks, Radical Republicans, etc. in order to protect or assert his rights and freedom, his entire social being.

Therefore, we cannot separate completely the positive outlaw from the negative because the only thing distinguishing them is different degrees of freedom (which we might associate with the positive) and fixity (associated with the negative) rather than the absence of one or the other. This inseparability of the positive and negative outlaw is of the utmost importance for the status of the negative outlaw. The association with the positive outlaw presents a hope for the possibility of a self-willed action that has performative force in the social realm. Hannah Arendt would call this an individual's political status, which exists in the public sphere. If this status is no longer valid, then action can have no meaning, no force, and even the inalienable rights of man, Arendt argues, do not apply, for he is only a man in the basest sense, who "has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man. This is one of the reasons why it is far more difficult to destroy the legal personality of a criminal, that is of a man who has taken upon himself the responsibility for an act whose consequences now determine his fate, than of a man who has been disallowed all common human responsibilities" (*Portable* 43). In other words, the very fact that we can call a person an outlaw, even though they may be banished from and viewed worthless by society, implies that they still have a legal personality. They have a responsibility for and an agency in their actions, without which all acts would be superfluous and no agency could even hope to exist, much less freedom, which is itself a superfluous idea if it leads to nothing.

This brings us to the implicit received gift of the outlaw tradition and the appeal of the outlaw figure in culture discussed in conjunction with the crossroad pact: freedom,

the root of the outlaw mode of existence and its performative force. If freedom is essentially “the opportunity for action, rather than action itself,” then the archetypal outlaw is a symbolic figure of this opportunity just as the crossroad is a symbolic space of possibility (Berlin 35). But just as we need to consider both the positive and negative aspects of outlaw existence and the figure’s relation to society, we also need to consider the type of freedom inherent in the outlaw mode of existence and performance in both positive (freedom *to*) and negative (freedom *from*) terms. The difference between these two types of freedom is essentially an issue of growth either toward an entirely self-legislated existence or an integration on one’s own terms. While negative freedom, as Isaiah Berlin argues, is the removal of obstacles that prevent an individual from acting as they wish, positive freedom moves toward a collective end. Positive freedom suggests growth in the form of potential action in the establishment of “a voice in the laws and practices of the society in which one lives” (Berlin 52). But for this growth to occur (to be even possible) one must have a type of negative freedom in that one is free of obstacles to choose to act toward this end. Thinking back to the crossroad metaphor, we can see the presence of these two senses of freedom. In the negative sense, there is the liminal space of the crossroad where one is free from any obstacle that may impede one’s choice to act. This space is symbolically outside law. The subject is free to act, to make a “pact,” essentially symbolizing his or her beginning movement toward growth, creation, toward establishing a voice in the laws and practices of society or, more generally, tradition.

What is an outlaw, then? At this point it should be clear that it's not just someone who breaks the law. It should also be clear that the scope of this study's consideration of the outlaw goes beyond the conventional treatment of the outlaw to exploring the essential issues at stake in the outlaw tradition and the figure's performative mode of existence: creativity (as in improvising on tradition), social/cultural worth, and freedom (as the possibility of self-willed action). In considering these essential issues at the root of the outlaw, this study also examines how these issues play out in the different *roles* the outlaw plays, which overlap in many ways but can be generally distinguished in four performative modes: 1) Historic, archetypal, or "classic" outlaws like Billy the Kid and Jesse James. 2) Folk outlaws, such as John Henry and Stagger Lee, in the narrow sense that they may be historic outlaws, but there has been a question as to whether or not they even existed, and their reputation is a result of folklore rather than fact. In other words it doesn't matter whether they existed or not. They've become real regardless. 3) Social outlaws, who are essentially those discussed in terms of the negative outlaw existence. The idea of social outlaws is not to be confused with Eric Hobsbawm's classic study of social bandits even though much of Hobsbawm's study is applicable not only to the social outlaw, but the outlaw figure in America in general.<sup>4</sup> 4) Finally, the performative outlaw who is at the center of this study. While there's an element of performance inexorably tied to all of these outlaw roles, the performative outlaw is one who invests himself or whose cultural performance persona is invested in the outlaw tradition. In the

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<sup>4</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* and *Bandits*.

performative outlaw we see a channeling, or crossroad meeting, of the first three outlaw roles. Thus the performative milieu of this representative outlaw is one that conflates the historic, folkloric, and social in a cultural act, thereby highlighting the essential issues at stake in the outlaw tradition and performance: creativity, social/cultural worth, and freedom. To these issues we need to add two more: violence and power.

Again, we don't generally refer to people like Rosa Parks or Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin as outlaws. What's missing? What makes *the* outlaw an outlaw? I suggest that it is violence; the threat of it positively and negatively, directed outward or threatened on the self, the price on the head, dead or alive. This is the archetypal outlaw's milieu, his environment. It's an environment where violence is a perpetual threat, emanating danger and chaos, opposing the safe stability of a settled and ordered existence. As Richard Slotkin argues in his critical studies of American myth-making and nation building, this dichotomy, which he frames in the classic distinctions of savagery (symbolically associated with the frontier) and civilization, is at the root of American social, cultural, and political identity.<sup>5</sup> By a process of "regeneration through violence," which "became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" beginning in the seventeenth century, settlers reacted to the perceived threat of the savage (read violent and uncivilized) and enacted a counter-violence to navigate and quell the perceived threat (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 5). In representation, the classic outlaw

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<sup>5</sup> See Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* and *Gunfighter Nation: the Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.

figure embodies a similar structuring metaphor of American experience, but at once both threat and counter-threat. In one sense, the outlaw is interpreted in terms reserved for the savage, such as Native Americans were interpreted. In another sense the outlaw is defined in terms of a pioneering individual who is well-versed in navigating the frontier, making a civilization out of the chaos, such as Daniel Boone. But while Native Americans and a figure like Daniel Boone could blur the lines of savagery and civilization, their symbolic roles as threat and counter-threat were never so ambiguous as the archetypal outlaw's: a role in which the true nature of violence in the American experience is more honestly problematized because of the figure's moral ambiguity.

But perhaps this summation is a bit too general even if it's a good place to begin to understand the role violence plays in the outlaw figure and his environment. The outlaw in this summation is purely mythical or archetypal, a useful symbolic understanding of the outlaw pattern of experience. What makes this symbolic understanding of the outlaw useful is that his tale, mythically rendered, represents in black and white the issues that arise with nontraditional outlaws who we don't call outlaws for one reason or another. Violence or the threat of it is a very real presence in cases of nontraditional outlaws, but in everyday life the presence and threat of violence is subsumed under larger narratives of say, Civil Rights or founding a new nation. Even though violence was an important factor in the construction of these narratives, it isn't central. While narratives of archetypal outlaws can certainly speak to larger issues like these, it seems that violence is always at the center of their stories. Their very existence as outlaws is defined by violence. And even though this definition by violence is not as

pronounced or masked in larger narratives, the threat of violence is no less present. It's coded in the context of the specific experience. For example, Adam Gussow's critical study of Southern violence and the blues tradition demonstrates how violence can define (by living with and reacting to the presence of violence) an outlaw existence and be subsumed, coded, or even reclaimed as a point of regeneration in a performative act. At the center of Gussow's argument is the threat and public spectacle of lynching in the Jim Crow South and how black blues subjects responded in coded expression and reception of blues performance. These subjects experienced a cultural life that was "enmeshed in . . . disciplinary, retributive, and intimate violences . . . and their participation in a blues culture that, although marked by these violences, offered blues subjects a badly needed expressive outlet, a way of conjuring with and redressing the spiritual wounds that such violence had engendered in them" (Gussow 6). This doesn't mean that counter-violence is not suggested in this expressive outlet, but rather than responding directly to the source of violence, we see blues subjects as often self-destructive and violent toward others in their lives. Still, there are examples of explicit acts of violence threatened toward the white specter of retributive justice such as in Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," where the love-sick speaker threatens: "I'm gonna do like a Chinamen, go and get me some hop / Get myself a gun, and shoot myself a cop" (qtd. in Gussow 194).

What the figure of the archetypal outlaw, as defined by violence and manifested in specific social and cultural contexts, might suggest or represent is that potential freedom is not freedom unless acted upon, exercised by force (in the extreme case). The archetypal makes theoretical freedom (its possibility) concrete by act. As Hannah Arendt



argues, “[T]he appearance of freedom . . . coincides with the performing act. Men *are* free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before or after; for to *be* free and to act are the same” (*Between Past and Future* 151). Is it really enough to say one is free, has the possibility to act? Is not some show of freedom necessary to make it felt, give it force? In other words, is not freedom via some form of violent act (read also, disruptive) necessary to give power to the powerless? If violence is the milieu and environment of the outlaw, real power is absent in this milieu, or rather there is a lack of power, which we might read as authority, that is at the root of violence. In the many ways we can read the symbol of the outlaw, we see violence and (lack of) power intertwined. There is no need of violence if real or natural power is secured. The government that must resort to violence does not govern by the power of authority, but the threat of violence. Likewise, the individual or group resorting to violence inherently expresses its perceived powerlessness. This is not to say, however, that the violent act (imagined or real) is a powerless act for it signifies an agency in the midst of powerlessness.

More than just one who breaks the law, the outlaw, by means of real or imagined (i.e. culturally performed) violence, represents frustrated power. Fittingly, Arendt associates violence with the enforcement of law, qualifying violence as “taking the law into one’s own hands,” which she argues, “is perhaps more likely to be the consequence of frustrated power in America than in other countries” (“Is America” 24). The idea that violence is so essentially connected to law, since it becomes the enactment of law in the absence of a just enforcer, suggests the relationship between violence and power present

in the outlaw figure, especially as the outlaw began to be viewed as a populist hero like Jesse James in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Essentially, all performative roles of the outlaw figure, particularly the good man, bad man, and honest man outlaws of this study, represent this relationship. In a good man outlaw like James, we see a representative figure performing the violent reaction to frustrated power that those who celebrated his folkloric legend could not perform themselves. The poor could do nothing to the rich, but James could act as their agent, robbing and redistributing the wealth. The bad man, too, was an agent for the powerless. Outlaw figures like Railroad Bill and Stagolee, as Gussow notes, “lived as mythic archetypes, sources of usable power, aids in identity formation” (Gussow 163). As figurative sources of usable power, the bad man outlaws demonstrated that the powerless could act, a vicarious outlet to reclaim the ever-present threat of violence in the peoples’ lives as a source of power. And even the honest man outlaw could serve as a source of usable power. Tortured, alienated, and torn by forces out of their control and social norms that became increasingly oppressive to individual autonomy, the honest man outlaw was someone to identify with, someone whose sometimes violent struggle became almost cathartic, freeing the audience: James Dean’s red-jacketed rebel remaining idealistic to himself.

The relationship between violence and power, the “creative” possibility of disrupting and improvising on traditional structures as a way to establishing social worth on one’s own terms and, most essentially, the realization of a theoretical freedom that is at the root of all these outlaw concerns are keys to understanding what an outlaw *is*, what mode of *being* the outlaw figure symbolizes amid social, political, economic, and

cultural forces: forces that oppress, outcast, and outlaw at every boundary that marks inclusion. Those forced to the margins and liminal spaces in all these structures can look to the outlaw figure, in whatever guise, to serve as a symbolic negotiation of these boundaries. The outlaw as an inherently rootless individual, essentially placeless in relation to the structures that exclude, reflects the real and metaphysical disconnectedness of the people he symbolically represents and claims the placeless existence as a means to enact or provide the freedom to precipitate change, to disrupt the traditional systems that fix outlawed individuals and groups in placelessness. “Fixity,” Houston Baker argues, “is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional. The ‘placeless,’ by contrast, are translators of the nontraditional” (202). As translators of the nontraditional, outlaw figures provide the possibility of changing the status quo, re-ordering traditional structures, by turning fixity’s power on its head. How ironic, then, that outlaw figures have played such a large part in shaping American folk traditions as well as capturing the national imagination to such an extent that they could be seen as representing an essence of American identity and even elicit sympathy from a president such as Theodore Roosevelt, who saw in the case of Jesse James a representation of public “sympathy for the outlaw” (qtd. in Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* [1910] vii).

## The Folk-Outlaw-American

It's no doubt clear at this point that the issues discussed thus far as essential concerns in understanding the outlaw speak to something more than what it means to be an outlaw. That is, what does it mean to be a citizen, a member of a community or region, a person who is able to exercise their rights and agency? Addressing this question is a project unto itself, but it's necessary to recognize that the idea of the outlaw is inextricably bound to citizenship. Recognizing this calls attention to the contradiction of a term like American outlaw, folk outlaw, or, as I phrase it, Folk-Outlaw-American. For to be an outlaw, at its root, means to be deprived of rights accorded to citizens, specifically the benefit and protection of the law and, more generally, inclusion in the public realm where all citizens are ideally and equally free to act. Therefore, no outlaw can truly be an American citizen. Rather, the outlaw is an outsider, marginalized either by act or being. The contradiction in this is the strong public appeal of and interest in the modern outlaw figure in America that arose in the late nineteenth century as well as the figure's symbolic representation of the freedom to act toward an establishment of social worth. The very concept of the *American* outlaw is almost puzzlingly oxymoronic for an outlaw is someone deemed separate from society and the nation at large. The outlaw is supposed to be the antithesis of the citizen, a wanderer who isn't bounded by laws as opposed to the settled citizen that lives obligingly within the boundaries of the law. These distinctions are much too clear-cut, and a complex relationship between the outlaw and members of American society arises, revealing the contradictory tension of

national, collective ideals and individualistic ideals of the democratic notions upon which the American republic was founded.

Chapter II addresses the complex ways that the outlaw figure exists in the American imagination, how he seems to be a part of (in a positive sense) and apart from (in the negative sense) dominant American ideologies of nationhood, citizenship, social and cultural identity, rugged individualism, and democratic collectivity. Specifically, Chapter II examines the historical moment, the late-nineteenth century, that the outlaw emerged as a distinctive, archetypal figure in America. The chapter highlights the most important outlaws to this study as they emerged from this moment: Billy the Kid, Jesse James, John Henry, Stagolee, and the general figure of the tramp or hobo. All of these outlaws have been surrounded and their myths augmented by folk culture, distinguishing them not only as particularly American outlaws, but Folk-Outlaw-Americans. But why make this “folk” distinction even if, on the surface, it’s a distinction we take for granted?

Adding “folk” as a modifier to “outlaw” and “American” complicates the paradox of treating the outlaw as essentially connected to American identity even further. The “folk” have been seen as both outside mainstream America, often a relic of its disappearing past, and also treated as representative of America’s core identity. In either case, the “folk” serve as a foundation of tradition and are therefore fixed in the past. In this way, the folk are treated, like the outlaw, as both a part of and apart from the nation. It’s certainly no coincidence that the prominence of the outlaw arose during the same time that the study of American folklore became an established field, institutionally with the establishment of the American Folklore Society in 1888 and

popularly in specific regard to the outlaw and the West, with the proliferation of dime-novel westerns and the increasing popularity of folklore and folk song collections.

Here we run into the problem of using the term “folk.” Like the figure of the outlaw, the idea of “the folk” and folklore has shifted greatly over time, serving numerous groups with their own motivations in claiming the folk as a sense of authenticity, tradition, and identity. This study, however, is not concerned with defining “the folk” in rigid terms. What’s essentially important to this study is the central paradox of the idea of “the folk,” its milieu and its existence as a communicative, performative process (rather than a specific identifying trait) as these factors play out in relation to the outlaw. Robert Cantwell sums up the paradox of the folk in American culture, where it’s structured by two antithetical strains, one being “aristocratic and romantic” and the other being “visionary, democratic, secular, populist, progressive,” both of which “converge in the central paradox of the American political experiment, designed to secure for the commonality the condition of nobility: independent, virtuous, honorable, but at the same time plain, modest, humble, serf as knight and knight as serf. At the heart of this paradox, and sustained by its own revolutionary energy, lies the idea of the folk” (*When We Were Good* 52) In both strains, the folk is a fictional narrative/idea, which may seem obvious now, and Cantwell’s description is certainly still shaded by a romantic perspective that has never really left the popular conception of folklore.

But perhaps this shade of romanticism is inevitable since “the folk” is our modern equivalent of ancient myth, a way to make sense of our existence amidst forces we cannot control and to communicate that experience. In this way, we can better

understand just why the folk and the outlaw figure arose during a time when American progress and the forces of modernity prompted a move to (re)claim the past and a construction of a “disappearing” cultural identity that could serve as the foundation for a uniquely American identity. Another part of the central paradox of “the folk,” is the fact that, in the early twentieth century, even though “the folk” was often co-opted to form a collective national identity, a representative part for the whole, it also inherently suggested a diversity of American identity and implicitly acknowledged the exclusion of the folk from mainstream modern America. As Simon Bronner argues, “Celebrating, indeed constructing, folklore as the basis of a national tradition involved accounting for the diverse groups that did not have a share in American polity. Much of the lore, in fact, could be interpreted as protest rather than promotion of nationalization. Much of it implied consciousness of race, ethnicity, and class that suggested conflict rather than consensus” (*Folk Nation* 7). In light of this paradox, I suggest that the idea of “the folk,” like the outlaw figure, finds its performative force at the point of this conflict; that the disruptive nature of this Folk-Outlaw-American sub-consciousness brings to light the unsettled, at times violent, and uncanny force underneath the establishment and perpetuation of the “settled” American (home)land.

## Outlaw Territory

Chapter II addresses the outlaw's "place" in the settling of home, physically and ideologically. Chapter III is about the uncanniness under the surface of the "settled" home, how it's expressed in the folk music milieu and why we might call the uncanny, unsettled home "outlaw territory," a placeless, liminal space—like the crossroad—that challenges and disrupts accepted notions of the settled home. At the root of this consideration is Greil Marcus' idea of the "old, weird America," a phrase he coined to describe "the territory that opens up out of" Harry Smith's six LP *Anthology of American Folk Music* released in 1952 by Folkways, compiled from commercial "race" and "hillbilly" recordings of folk songs during the late 1920s to the early 1930s (*Invisible Republic* 89). Characterized as a territory with the metaphoric boundaries of "an imaginary home and a real exile," Marcus notes the *Anthology*'s fitting appearance during the height of McCarthyism when an imagined/constructed notion of American ideals and home-life exiled and alienated scores of Americans (*Invisible Republic* 91-92). Yet the resonance of the imagined home and real exile that constructs the outlaw territory of the old, weird America sounded back and projected forward from this moment an essential uncanniness in the American experience, one that both repels and draws in the audience.

This uncanniness was nothing new, of course. Smith's collection simply called attention to it, constructed in a manner that would blur and disrupt social, racial, economic, and gender lines. The anthological folklore predecessors to Smith's



*Anthology* were many, but all in print, the technology for making long-playing records not being available until only a few years before Smith constructed his anthology. Two of these predecessors, both landmark collections, John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910) and Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag* (1927), are no less uncanny in the sense that they highlight voices that are from the margins of mainstream American society, but yet, were supposed to (as Lomax and Sandburg suggest in their introductions) represent the essential spirit of American identity. In both collections, the voices and tales are presented as "authentic" American voices upon which a tradition has been built. The problem this establishment upon marginalized voices—the working class, the poor, the violent, and outlaws—presents is that establishment of the stable, settled home was based on quite the opposite: homeless, wandering, disconnected, and dispossessed voices.

The folk anthology as a constructed forming of an imagined pattern of American experience in its very form poses problems of uprooting voices in order to form an imagined whole, drawing in and exiling, at the same time, the voices included. For this reason, Chapter III focuses on the anthological process, particularly in regard to Lomax, Sandburg, and Smith, in order to better understand the performative force of these voices to transgress boundaries and disrupt quotidian life. For, in one sense, particularly in the cases of Lomax and Sandburg, the celebration of these voices ignores the very disconnectedness of their existence, their uncanniness. In another sense, these voices are not only empowered by a sort of covert disruption, but by their very ability to achieve a

performative act, whether that act be achieved through those reading the words of these marginalized voices, performing the songs themselves, or listening to them.

The outlaw territory that is the old, weird America represented by these three anthological constructions of American folk identity is just that; a territory, “owned” by the nation, but not fully incorporated; a part of, but apart from the nation. This is an essential reason why Marcus’ description of Smith’s *Anthology* as a territory defined by the sense of an imaginary home and real exile is so fitting. Smith’s collection of songs is devoid of the social, cultural, and legal boundaries one finds in the nation. The voices of the collection are exiles because these boundaries are absent, but there is the implicit notion that they are to be (or were, in the sense that they are an heritage, one that is both repudiated and claimed at the same time) a part of the nation. And it’s from the context of this territory that outlaw figures draw their disruptive power in the performative cultural act.

### Performing the Outlaw

The final three chapters focus on specific outlaw performers who represent and enact all of the issues at the root of the outlaw figure discussed earlier and who emerge from the traditions and historical contexts that will be explored in Chapters II and III. By focusing on Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan in these chapters, I demonstrate in the specific contexts of their work what it means to be an outlaw and how this role is a

useful and powerful performative act in interpreting society and culture. Aside from the musically hereditary relationship of these three performers, there is a thread in their music that inspired this project: their treatment of the outlaw figure in America and their participation in the embodiment of this figure in their performance. Each improvises his own manifestation of the outlaw archetype tradition, reflecting an individualized experience of the times in which they performed, but at the core the traits of the outlaw figure remain constant.

Specific images and sounds from the careers of these three performers forcefully emerged from the ever-rolling soundtrack of the folk milieu as this project to shape. Each image and sound expressed the performative outlaw roles they played in their careers.

There was Lead Belly's 1935 *March of Time* newsreel. Dressed in prison clothes singing "Goodnight Irene" to John Lomax, Lead Belly re-enacts the moment Lomax discovered him in Angola State Prison. The millions who watched the newsreel learned that Lead Belly was pardoned on a murder conviction back in Texas because of his songs and it's suggested that the same happened in Louisiana with Lomax's help. After his release, Lead Belly shows his gratitude to Lomax by vowing to be "his man." To which, an apprehensive Lomax tells Lead Belly, "You're a mean boy. You killed two men," but quickly accepts. And there were more Lead Belly images: a 1935 newspaper headline announcing "SWEET SINGER OF THE SWAMPLANDS HERE TO DO A FEW TUNES BETWEEN HOMICIDES" and a caption under a close-up photograph of

Lead Belly's hands playing his twelve string guitar, reading "THESE HANDS ONCE KILLED A MAN," in a 1937 *Life* article.

And then there was Woody Guthrie standing with his guitar in 1941, across which he'd painted "This Machine Kills Fascists." In an uncanny way, the famous photo of Billy the Kid posed with rifle at his side and cocky look seemed to transpose onto this image of Guthrie. At the time of the picture, Guthrie had only been living in New York City for about a year, but had become fast friends with Lead Belly and his wife Martha, occasionally staying with them in their New York apartment. Not yet a nationally-known figure, Guthrie had already recorded his seminal album *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940) and penned some of his most famous songs, including "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Tom Joad," "Jesus Christ," and "This Land Is Your Land," the latter three of which, composed within one month of moving to New York City, fully demonstrated Guthrie's understanding of what it means to be an outlaw.

Finally, there was Dylan. Not the leather-jacketed Dylan tearing down the folk establishment with his electric guitar at Newport in 1965, but the conspicuous absence of Dylan (other than his name) on the cover of the 45 rpm Italian release of his single "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" / "Turkey Chase." It might have been a scene from a Spaghetti Western instead, with Billy the Kid on his knees and a shot gun to his chest, a fierce lawman on the other end looking like he's going to pull the trigger. This scene, from Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1974), accompanying a song that could be about the absolute death of Western myth and Dylan nowhere in sight, rather an observer and commentator somewhere on the margins like the character, named Alias,

he plays in Peckinpah's film. The image seemed obscure, and the echoey vocals of "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" sounded like the ghost of Slim Pickens' character might be singing, but somehow it fit naturally in with the performative ghost of Dylan's outlaw persona.

There was much more that followed in thinking about the role the outlaw plays in Lead Belly's, Guthrie's, and Dylan's works and performance personae, each wholly individual in their performance even as they recognized their traditional and personal heredity. These three outlaw folk performers, like the outlaws they sing about, did not spring out of the ground like some autochthonic figure, but perhaps more like Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, a platonic conception of the self, a self creation out of an expansive American mythology, in which the "the folk" play an integral part. And this is also why an outlaw like Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together" in the context of the excesses of his time. His outlaw ways, his excess show was, perhaps, naïve, an effort to achieve a calculated end that wasn't meaningless (to him) or essentially tied to outside social, economic, or cultural sources. Even time was a law he could step outside of, as he tells his chronicler Nick Caraway: "Can't repeat the past? . . . Why of course you can" (116). Thus, Chapters II and III examine the context from which the three performers culled their platonic self-creation as outlaws, a context that was not entirely unique to their performances, for as we see in Chapter II, the outlaw culture/figure is prominent in ideologies of American identity and nationhood at the end of the nineteenth century and continues to be. Chapter III narrows the context to the idea of folk music and culture, the outsiders that were nevertheless seen as integral to that American identity. Chapter III

attempts to discover and highlight the undercurrents of American identity, a parallel tale, a picture from life's other side with its violence and exclusion, the old weird America that always exists just under the surface of dominant American ideologies.

## CHAPTER II

### THIS TRAIN IS BOUND FOR GLORY: MAKING AMERICA, MAKING THE OUTLAW

Well, they taken John Henry to the whitehouse  
And they buried him in the sand,  
And every locomotive comes a-roaring by says,  
“There lies a steel-driving man.”

—Lead Belly “John Henry” (*Leadbelly Songbook* 31)

Old Jesse had a hard time, pore boy  
Old Jesse had a hard time, pore boy  
He saddle up the silver  
In his sadlling leather bags  
Old Jesse had a hard time, pore boy.

—Woody Guthrie “This Life Is Hard” (Woody Guthrie Archive,  
Song 1, Box 1, Folder 15)

Been workin’ on the mainline—workin’ like the devil,  
The game is the same—it’s just on a different level  
Poor boy—dressed in black  
Police at your back

—Bob Dylan “Po’ Boy” (*Lyrics, 1962-2001* 595)

There were “men of all colors bouncing along in the boxcar” (Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* 19). These “soldiers in the dust” were “troubled, tangled, messed-up men. Traveling the hard way. Dressed the hard way” (Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* 25). The “[m]ixed-up, screwed-up people” breathed in the gritty cement dust—refuse from a previous load—and choked on the staggering heat of a boxcar jammed with almost seventy hoboes (Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* 25). “They look like a bunch of dam corpses!” a railroad bull says hours later as the hoboes are herded out of the boxcar; bloodied, broken-down, and smelling of wine and gasoline, after an all-out brawl that erupted as the train clicked along at full speed somewhere in Minnesota (Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* 314). It was a “crazy boxcar on a wild track. Headed sixty miles an hour in a big cloud of poison dust due straight to nowhere” (Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* 25-26). It’s hard to imagine this train heading anywhere in the general vicinity of glory. But they sing anyway:

This train don’t carry no gamblers,

Liars, thieves and big-shot ramblers;

This train is bound for glory,

This train! (Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* 19)

The irony is certainly thick here, and the singers know it. They claim it as their own, cutting through the physical and economic irony of their singing these lines with hope, a cloudy promise of fortune ahead, pride in their trades, and collective solidarity as



outcasts. The biggest insult on this train is to question a man's ability to perform "honest" work and his willingness to do so. You won't (theoretically) find any "rustlers, / whores, pimps, or side-street hustlers" on this train (Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* 36). On this train you'll find the best at "manly labor": the self-proclaimed best blacksmith, weaver, logger, teamster, farmer, dynamiter, oil field driller, mechanic, and a modest, rambling folk singer (and sign painter), Woody Guthrie (Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* 26).

This lively episode frames Guthrie's semi-fictional autobiography, *Bound for Glory* (1943). Literally, it frames the book as its first and last chapter, but more importantly, Guthrie presents this scene as a figurative performance of the overarching themes of the book. This structure clearly suggests that the autobiography is not only about Guthrie, the individual and his beliefs, but also the social and cultural context of his times, the people he meets and how he engages with them as spectator, commentator, and performer. Like Walt Whitman, Guthrie's song of his self contains multitudes. Rendered as one of his folk songs writ large, *Bound for Glory* is representational, a performance that serves as a metaphor for the "folk" or the "hard hit," as Guthrie often calls them. We might call them outlaws, who built and cultivated America but were left behind in a cloud of poisonous dust. Yet, they still sing that this train is bound for glory.

Guthrie's use of the train carrying these hard-hit but hopeful outcasts as a metaphor for the scope of his book is quite fitting. The train itself is such a prominent symbol in his personal mythology (partly because of the autobiography, of course), in the uprooted milieu of the Depression-era outcasts'/outlaws' world, and ubiquitous in the subject matter and musical rhythms of folk music. The train is also an important

factor/symbol in the story of American progress. Thinking of the train in this manner and the two destinations, nowhere and glory, suggested in Guthrie's opening chapter, calls attention to the tension in the myth of American progress. Glory, the popular and dominant destination, boasts of a promise fulfilled in the rewards of settling the land (i.e. Manifest Destiny), establishing a home, a stable workaday existence, and stretching commerce across the vast expanse of land. In the former destination, which is really no destination at all, but a lack of one, nowhere suggests the uprootedness, instability, and exclusion (although we can't forget the romantic notion of nowhere either, a notion that was certainly significant in the romantic draw of the West) that run on the same track as glory. Or, as Guthrie's metaphoric train suggests, the train itself carries both those headed to glory and those headed nowhere, hence the tension and irony in his autobiographic episode. A performance like Guthrie's gives voice to those heading nowhere in the historical myth of American progress to glory and establishing a (home)land.

This chapter isn't specifically about trains or the myth of American progress, but rather the folk outlaws that emerge as representations of those left behind or living in the liminal space that borders the dominant historical myths. The popular representation of these outlaws and outcasts notably emerged in the late nineteenth century in the wake of the Civil War and the impulse to construct a national identity amid the ideological and physical settling of the land. With the development of a national system of railroads this settling was accomplished in an exponentially shorter timeframe than the hundred generations Thomas Jefferson had predicted. The "home" became a dominant idea and

symbol in America, where the forward-looking nation sought to establish firm roots, and even began looking back to substantiate those roots with an authentic American tradition. Inexorably tied to this process, the outlaw served as a dialectic foil to settlement and would play a similar role whenever a threat to “normal” life and society was perceived. And yet, the outlaws were a distinct presence in the popular imagination of the time and remain so today.

In the late nineteenth century, as the historic West passed into its mythic existence as the Old West, we see the classic outlaw figure passing from reality to tradition, likewise undergoing a mythological process, a metaphoric pardoning, and becoming a nostalgic figure of American myth. The legendary outlaws that emerged from this point forward not only represent those who were excluded from the ideal home or seen as obstacles establishing it, but also represent a popular fascination with an essential piece of the American past that signified its outlawish qualities (including the pioneering, rugged individualist) even as these qualities were somewhat repressed in the establishment of a civilized home. In this mythological process, the outlaw became a representative symbol in which the social and cultural tensions, complexities, and contradictions were telescoped and signified by the outlaw’s performance. This is not to say, however, that the outlaw as representative symbol simplifies or dispels any of the complexities or contradictions. Rather, the tensions become more prominent in the sharp focus of the individual whose mythic performance is shaped by external (social and cultural) and internal (personal) factors. In the external sense, we recognize how popular perception of the outlaw can shift over time and from group to group, such as

demonstrated in the models of the good man, bad man, and honest man figures. But there's something indomitable about the representative outlaw that persists even as society and culture appropriate the outlaw's performance, which adds to his symbolic complexity. No matter how masked or buried, if the performance is to have any force, his individuality must remain; for this is what validates the symbol and appeal of the outlaw figure.

Yet, oftentimes, the outlaw's individuality and force become so mythologized in culture and society that he becomes nothing but a symbol. In the case of classic or archetypal outlaws like Jesse James and Billy the Kid, their popular perception became so thoroughly mythologized even before their deaths that their original motives were almost completely eclipsed by their mythic representation. Nearly lost in the countless iteration of their mythic selves was their own performative shaping of their outlaw careers and legends, as well as the distinct social and cultural context in which they existed. Recovering these factors buried under myth can help to explain the distinct character of these classic outlaws that persists even as they shift in cultural roles over time.

This issue becomes even more problematic when we consider folk outlaws like John Henry or Stagolee. Because of their nearly complete historical anonymity (i.e. who they actually were or even if they existed), these folk outlaws approach the allegorical, empty of any real individual force. Certainly, much of the force of these outlaws as symbolic representations of a collective context doesn't rely on their historical existence. As Cecil Brown, in reference to his discussions about Stagolee with James Baldwin,

comments, “We didn’t know [at the time, 1982] that Lee Shelton was the original, yet we accepted the legend” (206). Considering the individual motives and situation of these folk outlaws, however, gives us a much better sense of why they became such prominent figures in the popular imagination. Surely, their historical acts are what precipitated their mythification, and the strength of their individuality as folk figures made the myth of their existence the stuff of legend.

With social outlaws, on the other hand, we find no real historical act that leads to mythic representation. In fact, there are no individual social outlaws (possibly Joe Hill could qualify) with the mythic stature of Jesse James or John Henry. Rather, social outlaws are most clearly representative of a group defined by society and culture, or even the economy (i.e. a trade or lack thereof) as we see in *Bound for Glory*. Perhaps the most prominent social outlaws at the end of the nineteenth century (aside from the continuing treatment of African Americans as social outlaws, but whose representative outlaws are more generally folkloric in nature) and continuing through the Great Depression were tramps or hoboes. Despite no prominent mythic individual standing as representative for this group, a representative type and lore emerge, which demonstrates a performative act (on the social outlaw’s part) to claim his outlaw status as his own. Hence, singing a song like “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum” or in full-knowing irony singing “This Train is Bound for Glory.”

The different types of outlaws (the classic, folk, and social) discussed in this chapter have become mythic cultural and social symbols. Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Stagolee, John Henry, and tramps with all their complex and contradictory roles as

mythical symbols do not simply perform a symbolic role even if they can and have often been interpreted in this way. In addition to playing this symbolic role in the scope of social and cultural context they also display an individual agency in cultivating the performance of this role. They claimed it as their own in one way or another even while others and the course of history made them into something much larger. Without this individual agency the outlaw would lack social and cultural force. Thus, in discussing the specific figures that follow we'll see how these outlaws attempted to portray themselves in public and consider who or what they were fighting for and against. Taking into account these historical factors reveals the complexities and contradictions of their public roles and how these individuals (or groups) helped to precipitate their own mythification while reinvigorating interpretation of their outlaw performance past empty symbolism and facile heroism. And finally, by implication of the outlaw's performative role in culture and society we'll see why the notion of home and settling is so integral to understanding the outlaw.

### Oh Give Me a Home

Obviously, the issue of home is significant in the case of social outlaws like tramps. Their homelessness and joblessness is what defines them. We'll see, however, that the idea of home, being free to establish one, and to have a say in the laws that govern that home, plays a significant role in shaping the outlaws to be discussed in this

chapter. But what does “home” mean in this context? A specific spot? A dwelling with a roof overhead? A measured-off plot of land? Or vast expanse of land that says “home” just by its very nature? Certainly there are many different ways to define “home,” definitions that vary from person to person and within different historical, social, and cultural contexts. There is, of course, the entirely conventional idea of home as a domestic space that generally remains constant. But one may also refer to the land within the borders of the New Mexico territory, or the South, or a certain section within St. Louis, or even a jungle camp in the woods beyond the railroad line. Yet even in these less conventional designations of home there’s always the idea of the conventional domestic space to measure against. For our purposes, then, “home” will be considered as a place with certain essential qualities that are represented in the conventional view of home: a feeling of belonging to a space (publicly or privately), a stability in which to identify oneself, and an expression of one’s identity. Overall, “home” will serve as a symbolic representation of these qualities. And what better symbolic American home to begin with than that famous home on the range?

“A Home on the Range” was not collected as a folk song and made popular until the first decade of the twentieth century. The original lyrics, however, were written as a poem, “My Western Home,” by Dr. Brewster Higley a few years before the American centennial. In the context of the Kansas plains in the early 1870s, the familiar lyrics that today seem almost mythically idyllic were perhaps much less so. Rather, it must have been simply a poetic rendering of the actual land Higley gazed upon. Looking back, however, Higley’s penning of the lyrics just after he settled (by virtue of the Homestead

Act) in Smith County, Kansas, within which is the geographic center of the contiguous 48 states, seems almost too perfectly symbolic of the American myth the song would perpetuate through the years. Certainly, Higley's poetic exaltation of the West is shaded by the romantic myth of westward settlement and Manifest Destiny. From his vantage the praise is forward-looking rather than the nostalgic looking back it would become. What's ironic in Higley's praise is that all the natural glory of the range that makes him feel so exalted will soon be altered forever with further settlement. Thus, Higley's composition of "My Western Home" marks the beginning of the end of the mythic western frontier. Essentially, it's from this point in American history and culture up to the end of the frontier approximately two decades later that the most famous American outlaws emerge.

In July 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner presented a paper introducing his now famous frontier thesis at a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago. He begins his paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," by citing a bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890, which ruled that due to the extent of westward movement and land settlement the "frontier line" could no "longer have a place in census reports" (Turner 1). For Turner, "[t]his brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic moment" (1). Thus, Turner announces the governmentally-sanctioned end of the frontier.<sup>6</sup> The physical promise of the West with its open land and

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<sup>6</sup> To clarify, Turner's frontier thesis is not that the frontier has ended, but that "American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this



opportunity had crossed the great divide of its life into its new role of the Old West and all of the mythic romanticism that came with it. In 1893, the end of the frontier was nothing to be mourned. It affirmed the national push westward in the name of progress and civilization. It was America's manifest destiny fulfilling itself.

Stephen Crane's short story "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898) is a clear representation of the effects and contemporary popular view of the progressive settling of the frontier. One might say that it picks up where "A Home on the Range" leaves off. That is, where the physical and natural home is transformed into the domestic home. The story opens with Jack Potter, the town marshal of Yellow Sky (a frontier town in Texas), and his new bride on a train heading west toward Yellow Sky from the more "civilized" San Antonio. The couple is clearly out of place in their surroundings, finding delight in the finery of the parlor-car with its "dazzling fittings," "the sea-green figured velvet, the shining brass, silver, and glass" (788). "To the minds" of the frontier lawman and his lower-class bride from San Antonio, the "surroundings reflected the glory of their marriage" (i.e. the glory reflected in progress) (788). Yet, Potter begins to feel an immense guilt as they near Yellow Sky. He feels that he "had committed an extra ordinary crime" by not consulting the town about his decision and thereby neglecting his "duty" to the town (789). Not only is he symbolically cuckolding the town to which he is "married" by his frontier duty as marshal, but he's also marrying into the civilization that

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expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character" (Turner 2-3).

is speeding to engulf his frontier town just as the actual land he watches out the window is “sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon, a precipice” (787).

Coming with the bride of civilization to Yellow Sky as the West sweeps speedily into the East is modernity: the train as the iron horse and an almost incessant awareness of standardized time. As Mary Anne Doane notes, in the late nineteenth century, “The wide diffusion of the pocket watch, the worldwide standardization of time to facilitate railroad schedules and communication by telegraph . . . testify to the intensity of the rationalization of time” (6). For railroads to run safely and efficiently an exact system of scheduling and telling time was necessary. By 1883, the importance of standardizing railroad schedules for safety and convenience led to the institution of standard time zones in the United States. This was not an entirely welcome change for some, particularly because of the ever-increasing power the railroads had over the country. An editorial in the Indianapolis *Sentinel* fumed, “The sun is no longer boss of the job. People—55,000,000 of them—must eat, sleep and work as well as travel by railroad time. The planets must, in the future, make their circuits by such timetables as railroad magnates arrange . . . people will have to marry by railroad time, and die by railroad time” (qtd. in Holbrook 357).<sup>7</sup> In 1893, national railroad regulations also gave specifications for railroad chronometers (pocket watches) used by employees. Crane humorously highlights the novelty of standardized time for the bride and groom as they

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<sup>7</sup> Speaking further to the power of the railroads during this time, it is quite telling that the government never even bothered to sanction the institution of time zones until 1918 with the Standard Time Act, thirty-five years after the convention was instituted by the railroads (Holbrook 359).

ride the iron horse toward the frontier. After we see the couple's wonderment at the finery of the parlor-car, Marshal Potter tells his bride, "We are due in Yellow Sky at 3:42" (788). His new wife then scrutinizes the silver pocket watch he has bought for her and informs him that it is "seventeen minutes past twelve" (788). The attention to time down to the exact minute continues when the scene shifts to Yellow Sky, and the narrator notes that the train is due in town in twenty-one minutes.

The scene shift to Yellow Sky introduces us to the Weary Gentleman saloon (a place that certainly heeds no standardized time) and its patrons: three spare-talking Texans, two mute-by-choice Mexicans, and one fast-talking Easterner in town on business. The jocular Easterner's inconsequential story-telling is interrupted by news that Scratchy Wilson, "the last one of the old gang that used to hang out" at the nearby Rio Grande, has gotten drunk and is looking for a fight with his two pistols ready and willing (794). The civilized East meets frontier West theme continues with the Easterner's disbelief that such things still occurred in America. Crane narrows the focus of this theme in the figure of Wilson, the outlaw and last remnant of the West, and his newly-civilized "ancient antagonist," Marshal Potter, who is due at the Yellow Sky station in twenty-one minutes (796).

Already, it seems, the romantic perception of the West has taken hold in this situation. The patrons of the Weary Gentleman take the proper precautions in barring the door and finding cover within the saloon, allowing for the possible serious implications of Wilson's "rampage." Meanwhile, Wilson's quick draw skills are romantically characterized as "electric swiftness"; Wilson's "little fingers of each hand played

sometimes in a musician's way" (795). It's clear, however, that even in the saloon's patrons there's a "weary" attitude toward the event. They understand the implications, but the story has gotten old and easily dismissed by modern progress as the bartender and Easterner hide behind a bar reinforced by zinc and copper armor. They know Wilson cannot harm them, so they just wait for the moment to pass.

In the street stands Scratchy Wilson as the last outlaw, the last embodiment of the spirit of the non-civilized West, who "chants Apache scalp-music" and looks upon Marshal Potter's home as "a great stone god" (796). But Crane, as the men in the Weary Gentleman wait for the passing of the moment, also notes the passing of the last pure, frontier outlaw (the romantic ideal of one, anyway). The narrator describes Wilson's garb as a "maroon-colored flannel shirt, which had been purchased for purposes of decoration, and made principally by some Jewish women on the East Side of New York," accompanied by boots adorned with "red tops with gilded imprints, of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England" (794). Needless to say, this is not the traditional outfit of the western outlaw. Wilson's ridiculous outfit was purchased "for decoration" and bears no relation to the frontier he is supposed to represent. It seems that Wilson is nothing more than a part-time (he only acts this way when he's drunk) decoration/remnant in a once-frontier town, like the Alamo in San Antonio amidst the hotels and IMAX theatre.<sup>8</sup> He's nothing more than a "kid" in his kid boots playing a game.

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, at the close of the nineteenth century, the Alamo had severely deteriorated in neglect and "had been commercially exploited as a wholesale-retail liquor emporium" (Kammen 240). It wasn't until 1904

There's a definite historical and symbolic connection to be made between Wilson and Billy the Kid, gunned down by Sheriff Pat Garrett less than two decades before Crane composed his story. The Kid was the quintessential representative of the Old West outlaw, and it's hard to imagine that Crane would have not thought of the Kid when creating his own archetypal outlaw. Wilson's clothes partly suggest this connection: the New York origin of his shirt perhaps speaks to Billy the Kid's place of birth, and the boots Wilson wears invoke a kid-like appearance. Further descriptions of Wilson's demeanor and actions also suggest a kid-like quality. Wilson is described as "playing" with the town while on his rampage as if "it was a toy for him" (795). In his final showdown with Jack Potter, who is caught off-guard and unarmed by Wilson as he's escorting his new bride home from the station, Wilson is clearly depicted as kid-like in his impertinent demand that Potter "[d]on't take [him] for no kid" when he believes Potter is lying to him about not being armed (797). The unarmed lawman is inconceivable to Wilson in his kid-like belief in the rules of the frontier game. What's even more unbelievable for Wilson is that Potter is married, and his disbelief exasperates his rage toward his "ancient antagonist" (796). Wilson, faced with "the presence of this foreign condition . . . was a simple child of the earlier plains," who hang-doggedly realizes that not only have the rules changed, but also that there is no longer a game to be played. All he can do is respond, "I s'pose it's all off now," and go home (798).

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that Clara Driscoll purchased the Alamo from Hugo & Schmeltzer Company in order to preserve the fort as an historic monument (Kammen 241).

In addition to portraying the last outlaw as kid-like, Crane also gives Wilson a demonic quality to stand in contrast to Jack Potter's representation of order and the "good" of civilization. Wilson's nickname, Scratchy, invokes a common nickname for the devil: Old Scratch. He's further aligned with the devil, in Edenic form, by the bride's reaction to Wilson's appearance on the street: Eve-like, "[s]he was a slave to hideous rites, gazing at the apparitional snake" (796). As overly romantic as this depiction of Wilson is, this fictional representation of the outlaw echoes the way Billy the Kid was portrayed in his obituaries and the mythology that was immediately built around his life. From the time of his death until the 1920s "[i]mages of the Kid clustered around the popular mythology of Satan and thus personified the outlaw as the devil's lieutenant, a prince of darkness" (Tatum 39). The Kid's obituary in the *Santa Fe Weekly Democrat* sensationalized his death, describing a scene where there was "a strong odor of brimstone in the air, and a dark figure with wings of a dragon, claws like a tiger, eyes like balls of fire, and horns like a bison, hovered over the corpse for a moment" before claiming the body as his "meat" (qtd. in Tatum 38).

This description of the Kid's death, one would hope, would've been recognized as sensationalistic, but regardless of whether or not it was, the clear-cut symbolism of the account was a popularly perpetuated representation of the Kid's performative role in American progress. Surely, anyone conceiving of the West as Higley does in "A Home on the Range" with its idyllic landscape can envision the archetypal outlaw, such as the Kid, in terms of a demonic force, and as we see in Crane's nearly allegoric tale, the outlaw was the last obstacle to be removed in establishing a civilized, domestic home in

the West. But how did Billy the Kid become the archetypal outlaw when there were so many other outlaws out West? And we might also ask why Jesse James, an outlaw of the same stature (perhaps even more famous) during the same time period, received a much different treatment in popular culture?

### The Minstrel Rustler and the Bushwhacker in Hood's Clothing: Billy the Kid and Jesse James

Let's just imagine that the story is true. Sometime in late July 1879, just outside of Las Vegas, New Mexico at the Old Adobe Hotel, Billy the Kid and Jesse James sat down and had dinner together. In two years the Kid would be dead by the hand of Pat Garrett, and in nearly three years James would be killed by Robert Ford. One of many dubious tales that surround the Kid and James, their meeting sounds like it could be from a dime novel. Throw in the fact that Doc Holliday was allegedly in town as well and it starts to sound like some fabulist's tale of the great outlaw convention of 1879. It's dubious, but plausible according to first-hand accounts and evidence that they were all in Las Vegas in July of that year. There's even a tintype photo that possibly marks the occasion: Billy the Kid, Doc Holliday, Jesse James, and one of the Kid's partners, Charlie Bowdre, standing in line for the camera.<sup>9</sup> Now we're getting into a big-budget

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<sup>9</sup> This tintype is owned by the Ellison Collection ([theellisoncollection.com](http://theellisoncollection.com))

Hollywood production, but let's say it's true. Billy the Kid and Jesse James had dinner together. What do an infamous cattle rustling outlaw and a former Missouri confederate bushwhacker turned outlaw celebrity talk about while dining?

Of course, they could have discussed robbing a bank or maybe a train, the new train line having just reached Las Vegas earlier that month. James often "recruited" men for jobs, although the Kid had never robbed a bank or train and never would. Or maybe the Kid was telling James about how Governor Wallace never came through with the pardon he promised him for testifying in a murder trial a month earlier. James might be reminded of the amnesty bill that would've extended amnesty to the James and Younger brothers, which was narrowly defeated in the Missouri legislature four years earlier. They may have also talked about how they got into the outlaw game at a young age, how they were thrust into a violent gang/environment in their mid-teens, initiating them into the outlaw world and introducing the outlaw talents they'd hone. And maybe after a few drinks (a rarity for them) they poked fun at each other's aliases: "Hey, Jesse, how come you picked a name that rhymes with coward?" "Well, McCarty, what the hell are they gonna call you when you get older?"

The imagined meeting aside, Billy the Kid and Jesse James did have a lot in common in the general terms of their initiation into the outlaw world, the unfulfilled pardon/amnesty, their inability to "go straight" and settle down, and their mythification by popular media. But as T. J. Stiles argues, "Too often [James'] actions have been seen in light of frontier criminals, men such as Billy the Kid or Butch Cassidy. But Jesse James himself looked South, not West; he, his brother, and his bandit colleagues were



proud products of the confederate war effort” (388). It’s not that we’ve lost the immediate context of James’ and the Kid’s outlaw careers, that they were products of two entirely different social and political situations, which results in the blurring of the distinct differences between the two. Billy the Kid’s story is firmly rooted in New Mexico and the Southwest, and James’ background as a Reconstruction-era Southerner is always present, if not prominent. Instead, it’s the rendering of their legends in the form of an archetypal outlaw persona that is so conventionally associated with the West. James and his cohort were indeed essentially products of their Civil War experiences as an extremely violent confederate guerilla force, their resistance to Reconstruction, and their unbending political beliefs. None of these factors play a role in the Kid’s career although we can place the major shaping experience of his career in the context of a war: the Lincoln County War of 1877-78, the famous New Mexico territory range war during which, and in the wake of, the Kid came into his own, transforming from ranch hand and hired gun to notorious outlaw. And certainly conventional “frontier” factors and territorial politics, outside of the reverberations of the Bleeding Kansas territorial dispute over slavery, don’t play much of a role in James’ career.

Despite conventional views of a high level of violence as a way of life in the Old West frontier (generally seen as a result of an environment where guns were ever-present, whiskey flowed freely, and strict, civilized laws were a mere dumb show if any were to be found at all), the violence of the Lincoln County War never reached the heights of violence and brutality perpetrated by confederate guerilla forces in Missouri. It might be enough simply to note the frequent scalping of victims (including Union

soldiers) on the part of the Missouri bushwhackers to demonstrate this disparity, but numbers make the matter even clearer. In the approximate one year of violence having to do with the Lincoln County War, 22 men were killed. In the 1863 raid on Lawrence, Kansas, Quantrill's guerilla force, which Frank James was riding with and Jesse would join soon after at the age of sixteen, massacred at least 200 citizens in one day. A year later, Frank and Jesse, led by "Bloody Bill" Anderson, participated in a raid on Centralia, Missouri, killing nearly 140 Union troops, 22 of them unarmed. Granted, the difference in the scope of warfare between the Lincoln County War and the Civil War is enormous, but this just makes it even more obvious what kind of violence Jesse James would have witnessed and participated in at a young age and just how different his world was from the Kid's. Billy the Kid, who certainly witnessed and participated in much violence, falling in with older outlaws like Sombrero Jack and Jesse Evans in his mid-teens, never experienced violence on this level. This disparity in violent experience (and act) between the Kid and James calls into question even more how we can consider them in terms of the same outlaw archetype. Stiles' contention that it's a mistake to view James' career in light of the frontier outlaw experience is undeniable. In fact, viewed in this light, it's only Billy the Kid who really fits the role as archetypal American outlaw, tied so closely to the Western frontier conventionally rendered as an apolitical and lawless social structure: "When the gun was your law and your law was your gun" (Guthrie, *The Asch Recordings* Disc 4 Track 3). Jesse James, as Stiles suggests, in the

scope of an outlaw career that was a direct result of a defeated and immensely politically-charged post-war society might more rightly be considered a terrorist.<sup>10</sup>

Yet somehow, the Kid was made a demon and James a tragic Robin Hood in the immediate years following (and even before) their deaths. I've highlighted the violence surrounding their stories because it's what shaped their historical careers. This violence, however, was subsumed or transformed into some other signification of their symbolic and cultural contexts. The Kid's violence and persona, his lawlessness, were signified as a romanticized symbol of an almost mythological obstacle to establishing a civilized home in the West as well as the disappearing Old West itself, a convention we saw Crane playing with in his story. As Tatum notes, "[I]n 1881 it was customary for observers to portray him as an unredeemable ally of those forces opposing the advance of law and order into the territory" (Tatum 39). James' violence was signified as a just reaction to those social and economic sources that oppressed the lower class, such as railroads and banks, and the political context of this violence was discarded. For instance, when the James gang robbed their first train in 1873 (the Rock Island Line outside Des Moines, Iowa) they "openly embraced the Robin Hood image, declaring themselves avengers of the working man against the monstrous corporations" (Stiles 236). The Robin Hood image persisted, while the image of the robbers "masked in full

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<sup>10</sup> While James certainly "took credit for some of the mythic qualities of the noble robber," his distinct political aims and methods make him "a forerunner of the modern terrorist" (Stiles 391). Stiles makes this distinction in light of James' "political consciousness and close alliance with a propagandist and power broker, in his efforts to win media attention with his crimes and his denunciations of his enemies" (391).

Ku-Klux style”—quite a more politically- and socially-charged “hood” to say the least—during this robbery has been all but forgotten (qtd. in Stiles 236).

Additionally, the violence of James’ acts is almost entirely eclipsed by the violence done to (rather than by) James at the hand of Robert Ford, immortalized in the well-known folk ballad written after James’ funeral. In the Kid’s case, on the other hand, the count of his personal death toll is almost fetishized: the standard description being twenty-one men, one for every year he was alive, making Garrett’s shooting the Kid seem entirely justified. While Billy the Kid’s story has inspired a few folk ballads, there are apparently none composed upon his death, and the earliest collected song about the Kid, appearing thirty years later (in 1911), shows no sympathy for him, nor judgment upon his violence other than he got what he gave. We now recognize that these portrayals were shaped by cultural context, but looking back at how James and the Kid performed their outlaw roles adds another dimension, which gives the ballads a deeper resonance.

The folk ballad of James’ legend is well known. The Kid’s earliest folk ballad portrayal is somewhat obscure. Why? One might think with such a romantic rendering of the Kid as the devil’s son-in-(out)law upon his death, his public notoriety, and the fairy-tale-like structuring of his career, that there’d be ample material to work with for composing a memorable ballad. Instead, the 1911 ballad of the Kid is simply a generic

badman/outlaw lyric, not even a specific narrative of his historical deeds.<sup>11</sup> Here are the opening and closing verses:

Billy was a bad man  
And carried a big gun,  
He was always after Greasers  
And kept 'em on the run.

.....

But one day he met a man  
Who was a whole lot badder.  
And now he's dead,  
And we ain't none the sadder. (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 140)

We should note that there's no real moral judgment here, suggesting that the ballad was composed after the initial rendering of the Kid's role as a savage, evil foil to the good of civilization's progress. His badness has less to do with his symbolic place in the saga of civilization and savagery and more to do with his intrinsic power and capacity for violence.

In a 1926 ballad version of the Kid's tale, during a time when the Kid's persona was beginning to take Robin Hood form in popular culture, we find a sentimentally tragic, moral judgment instead. Any national appeal he might have had during the time

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<sup>11</sup> The ballad was collected in 1911, but it could be at least a decade older.

of his sudden and short celebrity status and years following his death would speak to his daring and bravery, which, as Tatum notes, was nevertheless portrayed in dime novels of the time as “misdirected” (47). Instead of using his daring and bravery in a heroic manner, like Robin Hood, “the dime-novel Kid was ruthlessly self-centered, dishonest, a loser, and anything but a successful romantic interest” (Tatum 48). We see this portrayal of the Kid reflected in the 1911 ballad, without the moral judgment and perceived misdirection of the Kid’s talents. There’s certainly no implied apology or remorse for his acts either. We see a shift in perception in Reverend Andrew Jenkins’ popular 1926 ballad of the Kid, which tells his story and highlights the violence in his life, but with a sort of elegiac or moralistic comment upon his misdirected life:

There’s many a man with a face fine and fair  
Who starts out in life with a chance to be square,  
But just like poor Billy he wanders astray  
And loses his life in the very same way. (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* [1938]

142)

Jenkins’ ballad was presumably inspired by Walter Noble Burns’ popular biography, *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, published the same year. No doubt Rev. Jenkins read the bold heroics of Burns’ version of the Kid and felt the need to add some moral commentary to Burns’ overly romanticized *Saga*, which paints a portrait of the Kid as an outlaw by birthright, born with a “desperado complex” that “might be defined as frozen egoism plus recklessness minus mercy” (Burns 55). For Burns, the Kid was an exemplar of this complex, the master among journeymen desperados: “He was a genius painting his name

in flaming colours with a six-shooter across the sky of the Southwest” (Burns 56).

Jenkins’ ballad suggests that while the Kid’s story has an irresistible draw, enough to constitute a saga form in which the kid is a larger than life epic figure, one mustn’t forget that he was just a kid once and how astray his life had gone:

Fair Mexican maidens play guitars and sing

A song about Billy, their boy bandit king,

How ere his young manhood had reached its sad end

He’d a notch on his pistol for twenty-one men. (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs*

[1938] 141)

Woody Guthrie, clearly improvising on Jenkins’ ballad, using the same melody and similar language, created a more ambivalent version of the Kid in his ballad a decade or so later. Bob Dylan, incorporating a number of lyrical qualities found in both Jenkins’ and Guthrie’s ballads would create yet another—a more ironic—improvisation on the Kid ballad tradition nearly fifty years later. We’ll return to these improvisations. It’s clear, however, that there is a somewhat distinct lineage among Jenkins’, Guthrie’s, and Dylan’s ballads, leaving the 1911 ballad as a separate thread for which to account. Seemingly an oddity, a cross-cultural rendering of the Kid’s persona, the 1911 ballad, however, perhaps best demonstrates the archetypal model of the outlaw at the root of all of the Kid’s cultural roles and bears a more direct link to the Kid’s own performative “style.”

The lyrics suggest that the 1911 ballad was composed by an African American, evident in the vicarious boast in verse two: “And let a white man sass him, / He was sure

to feel his steel” (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 140).<sup>12</sup> If this is the case, then this version of the Kid fits squarely in the African-American badman tradition, of which Stagolee is its most prominent member. The distinction, “white man,” however, can also be read in contrast to the “Greasers” mentioned in the opening verse. But aside from the origins of the ballad reflecting the context of the Kid’s portrayal, what’s more telling of his overall cultural role is that the Kid, in this ballad, seems nothing more than an empty vessel, one that represents the archetypal outlaw and could be speaking of any Western outlaw. Just as there’s no moral judgment, there are also no specific details in his tale (he isn’t even referred to as “the Kid” past the title), whereas the James ballad gives specific details of James’ crimes and life. There’s a strong irony here in that the West’s most famous outlaw became so stereotypical that no historical details of his life were necessary in this ballad. What’s even more ironic is that the Kid participated in a form of entertainment that thrived on this form of representation: minstrelsy.

At times, the Kid has been described almost as a wandering minstrel. No doubt, the young Henry McCarty, who was born in 1859 and lived his early years in the lower-Manhattan or Brooklyn Irish slums of New York, was exposed to what was the most popular form of entertainment for the lower classes at the time, especially Irish immigrants, which his parents were. And apparently, along with his reading of the dime-novelish *Police Gazette*, minstrel performance left quite an impression on the Kid. As

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<sup>12</sup> Lomax’ attribution of the lyrics in the 1938 edition of *Cowboy Songs* doesn’t provide any specific reference to this possibility: “Sent in 1911 to John B. Jones by Jim Marby, who inhabited a place near Tucson, Arizona, with Sam Niggertoe, his pet coyote, an animal Jim found a whole lot easier than any of his wives” (140).



Utley reports, the Kid, in his early teens, used to perform minstrel acts with friends in Silver City, New Mexico, even playing in a minstrel troupe in which he was “Head Man in the show” at Morril’s Opera House (Utley 7). And as Tatum reports on various interpretations of the Kid’s historical legend: some say he had a beautiful tenor voice and others say he’d stop at ranches and sing for his supper, performing his favorite song, “Turkey in the Straw,” and minstrel classics penned by Stephen Foster such as “Old Folks at Home” (Tatum 10). Perhaps this background contributed to the Kid’s performative flair, magnified in his legend. The 1911 ballad demonstrates how the Kid, as outlaw archetype, had almost become a type of a minstrel stock character such as Jim Crow or Zip Coon or the general minstrel stereotypes of immigrants, particularly Irish and German, in that he was portrayed with exaggerated traits that the culture perceived as authentic to his perceived role.

Underneath the seeming emptiness of this minstrel-like archetypal representation, which distances the outlaw Kid from civilization, however, is the draw of the outlaw’s perceived power, violence, and cultural otherness, a public reflexivity that seeks to distance and incorporate at the same time. And we see some of the same public reflexivity evident in nineteenth century blackface performance, what Eric Lott refers to as “love and theft,” or any public dramatization of cultural and social tensions, as Victor Turner suggests in his studies on social drama.<sup>13</sup> Putting the kid in such a stereotypically

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<sup>13</sup> See Eric Lott *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995) and Victor Turner *The Anthropology of Performance* (1988) and *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982).

exaggerated role might seem preposterous, but as we saw with the demonic renderings of the Kid and the overall perception of him as *the* symbolic obstacle to civilizing the West, this type of characterization certainly occurred. For instance, on news of the Kid's death, the New York newspaper *The Daily Graphic* put it distinctly in such grand terms, "His passing marks the end of wild west lawlessness": so much to place at the grave of a twenty-one-year-old who "only" killed four men (none seeming to be unprovoked) and participated in the killing of five others (qtd. in Tatum 38). But then again, by the beginning of his final year, to the public, the Kid had ceased to be anything but an archetypal performer on the national stage, a dark and dangerous but appealing celebrity.

When the Kid caught the nation's attention in 1880 as he rose to the top of a long list of New Mexico outlaws with a five-hundred dollar bounty on his head, he was not the demon he would become after his death. In fact, the legends of his amiable, kid-like demeanor seemed to be confirmed after he was captured by Pat Garrett at Stinking Springs in December of 1880. During a short stay as a prisoner in Las Vegas, where the Kid was looked upon as a celebrity, a *Las Vegas Gazette* reporter described the Kid as "light and chipper and . . . very communicative, laughing, joking and chatting with bystanders" (qtd. in Utley 164). The Kid knew how to play a crowd and how to elicit sympathy, perhaps a talent he began to cultivate in his minstrel days. Responding to the curious interest of the crowds that came to look at him, the Kid told the reporter, "Well, perhaps some of them will think me half man now; everyone seems to think I was some kind of animal" (qtd. in Utley 164). Throughout his short outlaw career, the Kid also portrayed himself as a victim, particularly in his appeals to Governor Wallace, which he

would repeat to the *Gazette*'s reporter: "I made my living by gambling but that was the only way I could live. They wouldn't let me settle down" (qtd. in Utley 166). While comments like these may have gotten him some sympathy, they certainly don't suggest that he was a Robin Hood figure, although we mustn't forget that he never claimed to be.

In fact, Billy the Kid was something else entirely, even though later portrayals would make the Robin Hood connection, once the immediate facts of the Kid's life dissipated and became shrouded in legend and mystery. And yet, he was similar to Robin Hood in the way that he became an archetype of an outlaw, authentic to American western experience. This is perhaps one reason why the Kid's persona didn't initially call upon the tradition of the older outlaw. Pat Garrett's *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid* actually portrays the Kid favorably in terms of his chivalry and generosity that could have been likened to Robin Hood.<sup>14</sup> Garrett describes the Kid as having a "courteous and gentlemanly demeanor" and claimed that "there were no bounds to his generosity" (22-23). Yet these qualities seem to be curious contradictions to the unflinching and remorselessly violent character of the Kid that Garrett's tale and the contemporary popular reception of the Kid highlight above all else. Thus, the Kid came to represent a distinctly different outlaw archetype than Robin Hood, whereas Jesse James clearly decided that the ready-made archetype of Robin Hood was perhaps a better role to play to elicit public approval.

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<sup>14</sup> Garrett's account was published soon after he killed the Kid. It was written with the help of frontier postmaster and journalist Ash Upson (who most likely wrote more than half the book), whose writing had a distinct flair for sensational romanticism. In fact, Upson can be considered the first major creator of the popular Billy the Kid myth.

On April 3, 1882, less than a year after the Kid was killed, Robert Ford shot Jesse James in the back as he was dusting off (or hanging in some accounts) a picture frame. While the lore surrounding both the Kid and James has suggested a similarity in their deaths, both shot in a domestic and compromised situation by a “friend,” the immediate aftermath of James’ death did not result in the moralistic demonization that followed the Kid’s death. In fact, the popular ballads of James that followed portray him as a betrayed martyr who was a friend to the poor, an American Robin Hood. Instead of providing, or filling, the Western outlaw archetype as was the case with the Kid, James purposely embraced an older, chivalric type of outlaw that actually corresponded more closely with the South’s mythic conception of its traditions than any notion of the frontier outlaw. In 1910, Theodore Roosevelt, commenting on John Lomax’s song collection *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, notes the “curious” reproduction on this “new continent” of ballad traits once found in medieval England, particularly “sympathy for the outlaw, Jesse James taking the place of Robin Hood” (qtd. in Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* [1910] vii). But the creation of this public persona was not entirely a result of his famous death or some autochthonic spirit of national sympathy for the outlaw brought over from England. It was cultivated while he was still alive by public reaction to James’ outlaw performances perpetrated against banks and railroads, institutions that were viewed less than favorably by the majority of the working-class public, particularly farmers, and by his own rhetorical performances. Billy the Kid may have known how to charm a crowd with his flair for entertainment, but Jesse James was a shrewd publicist and knew how to appeal to his target constituency. In fact, “of all outlaws,” as Stiles notes, it was Jesse

James who “was most obsessed with his public image, who sought to push himself into the news . . . more than one of his confederates would observe that he planned robberies with an eye on the public reaction” (226)

Because Jesse James was not representative of the frontier or, like the Kid, an obstacle to American progress, although this could be argued if Reconstruction is viewed in progressive term), there was no “good” reason to demonize James other than from the perspective of bank and railroad officials and unionists. It wasn’t a simple question of the clash between savagery and civilization. In James’ case, it was a matter of the clash between North and South, which poses an interesting question: who exactly are the poor James was said to be speaking for with his guns? By the time Roosevelt commented on the American sympathy for the outlaw the answer to this question had become somewhat ambiguous, but while James was cultivating his own myth there was little doubt as to who he saw, or rather, postured, himself as representing: Southerners opposing reconstruction. The law James was opposing was northern reconstruction and the institutions he was robbing were northern-controlled industries. In short, his acts of outlaw daring and bravery elicited sympathy from Missourians, particularly staunch confederate sympathizers, because the victims of James’ acts were considered oppressive outsiders.

Beginning in 1870, with the aid of the *Kansas City Times* editor, former Confederate Major John Newman Edwards, Jesse James cultivated his Robin Hood persona chiefly through letters often addressed to the governor published as public statements in Edwards’ paper. In these letters James professed his innocence of crimes

he was said to have committed and insisted that he could provide alibis. In pleading his innocence he also attacked the justness of the law, claiming that because he had been a guerilla during the Civil War he would be unfairly treated if he were to turn himself over to authorities. Public appeals would begin to plant the idea that James was merely a victim of the northern-influenced politics and legal system of the Radical Republicans, who had flooded the state after the war. In a June 24, 1871 response to a charge that he and his brother robbed a bank in Iowa, professing their innocence, James wrote, “If times ever get so in Missouri that I can get an impartial trial, I will voluntarily go to Clay county [sic] and stand my trial. But I am satisfied that if I was disarmed at present, that those brave Radical heroes in Missouri would try to mob me” (qtd. in Stiles 215). The rhetorical performance of James’ letters and Edwards’ editorials created a mythical Jesse James who “refused to apologize for fighting for a just cause; he refused to lay down his arms and self-respect, and was being persecuted as a result” (Stiles 217). There were many Missourians who could relate to James’ claimed victimization, and it would not be much of a leap to fashion this victim into a Robin Hood figure fighting for all victims of northern injustice.

It appears that James and Edwards didn’t wait for the public to make this connection and took steps to foster it. After a robbery of the second annual Industrial Exposition in Kansas City (1872), believed to be perpetrated by the James gang (although never confirmed), Edwards wrote an editorial titled “The Chivalry of Crime.” In the editorial, “Edwards drew a sharp distinction between armed robbery and skulking crimes such as burglary. But where most Americans snapped up books about the

professional thief and scorned the gunman, Edwards exalted the holdup man” (Stiles 224). He further identified the “bushwhackers” with fabled knights such as King Arthur and Sir Lancelot. Two weeks later, the *Kansas City Times* published an anonymous letter written by one of the outlaws (presumably Jesse James) who robbed the exposition. The outlaw picked up on Edwards’ chivalric theme, claiming to “rob the rich and give to the poor” in order to combat the lawmakers, including President Grant, who “rob the poor and rich” (qtd. in Stiles 225). Whether or not James was the anonymous outlaw who wrote the letter, the public could easily make the connection in light of James’ previous letters.

Despite the specific political bent of James’ public statements, the Robin Hood persona could be appealing to anyone who saw themselves as being exploited by the rich and powerful or even anyone who was drawn to the chivalric myth of the outlaw. This is perhaps one reason why James became immortalized in the folk ballad about his exploits as an American Robin Hood without mention of his political leanings or even the Civil War. Instead, the folk ballad focuses on the institutions of the rich that Jesse and Frank James robbed in the name of the poor: banks and railroads. Following the Civil War, public sentiment about banks and railroads was less than favorable. As Norm Cohen notes, “[R]apid westward expansion and the expense of new machinery led farmers to borrow heavily, so that by the turn of the century more than 40 percent of the farms in the Midwest were mortgaged, generally to eastern moneylenders” (102). If an outlaw robbed these banks, the general public which was struggling with debts certainly wouldn’t look upon the crime unfavorably. Similar sentiments would arise during the

Great Depression, especially in the areas hit by dust storms, where Jesse James' Robin Hood persona would be revived in the figure of Oklahoman outlaw, Pretty Boy Floyd.

During the 1870s, however, when James began robbing trains, the railroads were an even more looming institution than banks. As Stewart Holbrook notes, "[T]he public attitude toward railroads . . . was one largely of fear and hate combined. . . . Farmers who felt they had been cheated, either in land deals or freight rates, were not prone to worrying much if other men preyed on the railroads" (373). Ironically, as Stiles points out, James never really robbed the railroads. Instead, he and his gang robbed express companies, railroad cars contracted by private companies hauling money, mail, packages, etc. for priority delivery. The robberies had little direct effect on the actual railroad companies. Yet, the public spectacle of these robberies in the news, even through statements drafted by the robbers and left at the robbery site to be published, understandably neglected to make such a distinction. When the James gang robbed their first train outside Des Moines, Iowa in 1873 they let the passengers know who they were doing it for, repeating the claim that was made in the anonymous letter published in the *Kansas City Times* that they were robbing the rich for the poor. As noted earlier, however, James and the gang were wearing much more ideologically explicit hoods even as they claimed the Robin Hood tradition.

Outside of the South and/or the immediate context of the reverberations of the Missouri guerrilla war, James' deliberately constructed Robin Hood persona was able to grow to a more archetypal outlaw dimension, taking full symbolic force in Eastern newspapers and dime novels. By 1881, the first dime novels devoted to James as a



leading character appeared, riding not only on the James' notoriety, but also the popularity of fictional dime novel outlaw heroes that began appearing in 1877, notably Deadwood Dick, who was "intelligent, handsome, and chivalrous" (Jones 76). But as we've seen, particularly with Billy the Kid, there's a dark ambivalence to the outlaw, always a threat of violence and danger, sometimes hidden under a romantic hood; Deadwood Dick, for all his bravery and chivalry, was still pictured as clad entirely in black and riding a coal-black horse. Symbolically, we also see this in the strange ambivalence of a Ku Klux-hooded James invoking Robin Hood. And even when Roosevelt, in 1910, was noting a tradition of American sympathy for the outlaw displayed in the James folk ballad, James' outlaw persona had shifted a number of times over the course of hundreds of dime novels, and that persona was not always sympathetic, especially at the turn of the century. Two specific series by different publishers (Frank Tousey and Street & Smith) produced a combined 277 novels based on James from 1901-1903. Tousey's James Boys Weekly even went so far as to produce a story making Robert Ford a hero for killing James, whom Ford witnessed beating an old man to death. This beating also caused the man's daughter (with whom Ford had once been involved) to commit suicide (Deutsch 5). And yet, after all the dime novels written about James, portraying him in many different ways, he's still associated most readily with Robin Hood and the portrait constructed in one folk ballad.

If Billy Gashade's claim to authorship of the ballad (often found in the last verse) is indeed true, the ballad would be yet another example of the James camp cultivating the myth through the news:

This song was made by Billy Gashade,  
As soon as the news did arrive;  
He said there was no man with the law in his hand  
Who could take Jesse James when alive. (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 155)

The identity of Gashade or Garshade or LaShade (depending on the ballad version or personal account) is somewhat problematic. D. K. Wilgus reports that Frank James' son, Bob (who was four at the time), claimed that Gashade was a newspaper man from Liberty, Missouri who was a friend to the James brothers and wrote the ballad after Jesse's funeral (Cohen 103). If this account is true, then it seems that the ballad is an extension of the public persona James and Edwards had constructed through the news media. What's particularly interesting about the ballad is the fact that the two constructed identities, the mythical public and conventional private lives, of Jesse James are distinguished and the historical Jesse James is lost somewhere in between, as if he, Edwards, and Gashade constructed his myth so well that the actual man figuratively disappeared the moment he was buried:

Poor Jesse had a wife to mourn for his life,  
Three children, they were brave;  
But that dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard  
Has laid poor Jesse in his grave. (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 154)

The Jesse James of this ballad is the constructed Jesse James, the Robin Hood of public myth. Thomas Howard was the alias James was living under in St. Joseph, Missouri when Robert Ford shot him. Thus, James' private life as Mr. Howard was equally

constructed. We might ask then where does the historical Jesse James exist? Metaphorically, he exists somewhere between the mythic home and the public imagination. Not only had the constructed Robin Hood figure that fought for the poor been cowardly executed, but the symbolic home had been disrupted by an oppressive law that would not let Mr. Howard, his wife, and three brave children (James actually had two children) rest in peace. The Howard home is symbolic of the ideal American home, which was destroyed by an agent of the law. After all, Ford was acting as its agent in order to collect the reward for James' death. And yet again, as was the case with Billy the Kid, the law was enforced by frontier justice. In the attempt to settle America (the South in this case, which also brings up the issue of Northern violation/occupation of the Southern home) a symbolic unsettling of home occurs once again. This violent unsettling demonstrates a sense of justice that favors the powers or institutions that are attempting to "settle" the land through political maneuvers and progress, particularly through railroads, which displaced and dispossessed people in their progressive and money-driven push to build their nationwide network of steel rails.

But we can't ignore the fact that the historical Jesse James, the one that not so much represented the social and cultural context of his times, but rather lived within it, thrived in the public arena. He sought it out and took steps to construct a public image that inspired the ballad. And if he constructed the Robin Hood image persona of himself, he likewise constructed the domestic persona, the Mr. Howard who would like to live in peace if only the corrupt officials wouldn't bother him. In a less public moment, Jesse James, as reported by his cousin, George Hite, Jr., claimed that he couldn't give up the

outlaw life because he needed to make a living: “They wouldn’t let me stay at home, and what else can I do?” (Stiles 299) We’ll never know whether or not James really wanted to give up the outlaw life, but a comment like this just demonstrates that in the end, underneath the political context and his obsession with public notoriety, his outlaw acts were self-centered. Additionally, looking back to his violent initiation into the guerilla/outlaw world, we also see that his outlaw acts were an outgrowth of the skills he learned amidst extreme violence. Accounting for these deeper motivations and the violent factors to James’ outlawry, then, we uncover the “badman” underneath the Robin Hood.

Two verse variations of the ballad account for Jesse’s violent ways, similar in tone to the badman ballad about Billy the Kid, which demonstrates the violently self-centered archetype of the outlaw:

Jesse went to his rest with his hand on his breast;  
The devil will be upon his knee.  
He was born one day in the County of Clay  
And came from a solitary race.

Jesse went down to the old man in town,  
Thinking he would do as he’d please;  
But he will dwell in the City of Hell  
And he’ll go to the devil on his knees. (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 155)

In these variants we see two perspectives on his badness. In the first variant, James is recognized as a solitary man (i.e. he's an outsider to the dominant society), one who can command the devil, court him like a lover upon his knee, or put himself in a position of authority as if the devil was a child upon his knee. In this perspective there's a sense of tragic heroism, not essentially of the Robin Hood kind, but of a man who was willing to get his hands dirty to accomplish what's just, despite what the law and social norms dictate, and is exiled from "normal" life, including, we might surmise, a settled home; the one "they" wouldn't let him have. The second variation moves from the tragic badman of the previous verse to rendering James as a powerless badman in death, echoing somewhat the Billy the Kid badman ballad in that he was a bad man, but met a man (the devil in this case) a whole lot badder. In this case, however, there's cosmic retribution in dealing with James' bad deeds. The second variation has been attributed, according to John Lomax's note, to "a Missouri Negro," which places James' outlaw persona, in tone and context, in the badman tradition of Stagolee, another Missouri outlaw, rather than Robin Hood.<sup>15</sup> In fact, as we see in a number of Stagolee ballad

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<sup>15</sup> This attribution has caused much of the confusion as to the true identity of Billy Gashade. Following the first line of the last verse where Gashade claims authorship, Lomax notes, "The last stanza was made by a Missouri Negro" (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 155). This has led many people to identify Gashade as a black songster or minstrel. However, Norm Cohen, after examining the manuscripts of *Cowboy Songs*, found that the footnote actually refers to the second to last verse. The badman verse was not in the 1910 edition of *Cowboy Songs*. Lomax added the verse and footnote to a facsimile of the original 1910 manuscript in preparation for the expanded 1938 edition. Cohen explains, "The footnote . . . was to refer to the new stanza (beginning 'Jesse went down to the old man in town') that was added, in the 1938 edition, just before the final 'This song was made by Billy Gashade' stanza. Somehow, between the rough manuscript and the printing of the 1938 edition, both the meaning of the footnote and its referent were misinterpreted. That the meaning of the original manuscript version was correct is verified by another item among the Lomax papers, a transcription of a single 'Jesse James' stanza—the one beginning 'Jesse went down to the old man in town'—with the annotation at the bottom 'From a Missouri negro'" (107). It should also be

variations, Lee also goes down to hell, and more often than not, he doesn't bend a knee.

He takes over:

Stack he tol' de devil, "Come on, le's have a lil fun,

You stick me wid yo' pitchfork an' I'll shoot you wid my 41." (Lomax,

*American Ballads* 99)

### The Badman and the Steel-Drivin' Man: Stagolee and John Henry

Lee Shelton, the man who became notorious as the badman Stagolee, was about eight years old when John Henry died sometime around 1873. On the surface there appears to be little that these two men have in common other than that they are legendary African American folk figures that became such appealing and powerful symbols that their popularity transcends almost completely the contexts of history, biography, and race. Shelton and Henry, nearly mythic from the start of their cultural figuration, demonstrate succinctly how the folk outlaw figure can be stripped of his historical context, keeping the core outlaw traits and discarding anything superfluous to mythic structure. Stagolee's St. Louis political ties have disappeared in the scope of his violent tale and his overall representation of individual power that can be claimed in the most oppressive of contexts. Henry's heroics—almost as if he stands as a foil, the very

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noted that the verse in question is much more indicative of the African American badman ballad tradition than any other verse of the James ballad.

image of a good man, to Lee's badman—cloud his status as a prisoner and unwilling worker in the convict work lease program. Even Cecil Brown, whose thorough consideration of the Stagolee myth, *Stagolee Shot Billy* (2003), refers to Henry erroneously, though not surprisingly, as a “Christian who worked from nine to five on a railroad,” sacrificing “his life for [the white] system”: something, Brown argues, Lee would *never* do.

And if these two figures seem somewhat antithetical within African American folklore and in popular representation, considering them within the context of the outlaw might appear to merely accentuate even larger differences between the two as well as the overall problem of considering them in light of a tradition where the archetypal form is that of the Western desperado. But as noted in Chapter I, the modern outlaw figure has roots in mythic trickster traditions across cultures. Dime novel versions of classic outlaws like the Kid and James accentuate this, giving the outlaws trickster qualities like invisibility, shape-shifting in the form of disguise and cross-dressing, immortality, and the negotiation between law and chaos. Likewise, Stagolee's and John Henry's performance as folk outlaw figures can be traced backed to African and African American trickster tales. As John W. Roberts argues, “In the folklore of enslaved Africans, the trickster tale tradition embodied a conception of behaviors based on values guiding actions that in the late nineteenth century would have been considered those of an outlaw” (184-85). It's not surprising that elements of the African American badman tradition resemble the elements of the archetypal outlaw in the Kid's or James' form, and even though we usually don't think of Stagolee in the same terms as the Kid or James,

the connection isn't so tenuous, at least no more than the differences we saw in the context of branding the Kid and James as archetypal outlaws. John Henry presents a more distinct problem in making any connection between his tale and Stagolee's, much less those of the Kid and James. And yet we can still view his tale in the context of the outlaw, but we have to look past the simple heroics of the conventional reception of the tale to the subversive nature of Henry's act and the historical and legal context in which he performed that act.

I'm not arguing that John Henry is a badman figure disguised as a good man, and I'm not seeking to gloss over the distinct differences between Lee and Henry. Rather, the main point is that Lee and Henry are both outlaws, even though we do not conventionally think of Henry entirely in this manner. Also, even though we might consider these outlaws as social outlaws in the same manner that we'll be considering tramps in the next section, their structured roles as mythic trickster/outlaws intrinsically highlights more their creation as folklore figures rather than social figures (although folklore is inherently a representation of the social and cultural milieu that creates it). We can't ignore the fact that the social and cultural context of their times, as also in the case of the Kid and James, shaped their mythic rendering as much as the more "universal" archetypes and trickster roots. More than anything in the case of folk outlaws like Stagolee and John Henry, however, racial tension within this context plays a major role. Thus, in the waning years of Southern Reconstruction until the end of the nineteenth century, Roberts argues,



The relationship which developed between African Americans and the “law,” personified in the white law enforcement officer, greatly facilitated the transformation of the black conception of the trickster to create the badman as an outlaw folk hero. African Americans in the late nineteenth century . . . came to realize . . . that [the white lawman’s] power was one that could be subverted and manipulated” (197).

Stagolee and other traditional badman figures like Railroad Bill and John Hardy clearly demonstrate qualities of subversion of white power even as the violence they perpetrate, especially in the cases of Lee and Hardy, is paradoxically inflicted upon their own community; a paradox we often see in traditional trickster tales where trickster acts can at times threaten their specific community as much as the overall social and cultural structure. John Henry, on the other hand, doesn’t exactly fit this model. Considering Henry in light of the badman figure poses problems that can’t be addressed unless we get to the root of his performative act, what put him in the position to perform that act, as well as noting some of the essential qualities of his tale that are similar to the structure of the badman figure.

Perhaps one of the essential qualities that link Henry to Lee is his sense of destiny, or rather his fated death. As Jerry H. Bryant notes, “An unavoidable sense that he is fated to die hangs over the classic badman figure. He even carries with him a hint of redemption for African Americans, not from their sins, but from their oppression” (7). Of course everyone is fated to die, but what Bryant is speaking of here is that the

badman can almost foresee his death and it's never a natural one. While we might not call John Henry a badman, he foresaw his death, even as a child:

John Henry was a li'l baby, uh-huh,

Sittin' on his mama's knee, oh, yeah,

Said: "De Big Bend Tunnel on de C. & O. road

Gonna cause de death of me,

Lawd, Lawd, gonna cause de death of me." (Lomax and Lomax, *American*

*Ballads* 5)

Stagolee, in many versions of his tale, also has a sense of his own fate in that his almost magical powers, symbolized by, in some versions, his ox-blood Stetson hat (in others it's milk white), were a result of a deal he made with the devil, and his soul would eventually belong to the devil. There's something about these unavoidable ends, the fated death hanging over the lives of Henry and Lee, which symbolically suggests that no matter what they do in life the system will lead to their death or even worse, leave them soulless. Knowing their fate before hand and facing it head on, however, provides them an opportunity to subvert that system in the time they have. In another variant of the Stagolee ballad, collected by John Lomax in 1934, there even seems to be a melding of the Henry and Stagolee ballads, sounding as if it's a young John Henry destined to take revenge on Lee for killing his father:

When I was a little boy sitting on my mother's knee

She often told me of that bad man Stagolee.

"Son, O Son, when you get to the age of twenty-three,

I want you to kill that bad man Stagolee.” (Brown 68).

This melding of ballads, perhaps greatly precipitated by the primarily oral transmission of the songs suggests that there is something essential connecting Henry and Lee in addition to the sense of fate. But what?

Bryant suggests that Henry can indeed be considered in the scope of the badman, falling into a category of the badman Lawrence Levine calls the “moral hard man,” evident in other public figures like Jack Johnson and Malcolm X (Bryant 3).<sup>16</sup> This is in contrast to the category Stagolee falls in, what Roger D. Abrahams calls “hard men,” such as John Hardy and Railroad Bill (Bryant 3).<sup>17</sup> The major difference between the two is that the former works within the system and disrupts it, and is often characterized, except in Henry’s case (conventionally, anyway), as “a racial warrior with a political agenda” (Bryant 3). The latter disrupts from the outside to no apparent end, much like the conventional portrayal of the archetypal outlaw as well as the trickster. The “‘hard man’ scorned social action. He was a fierce individualist, a scourge in his own community, introducing disorder and arousing fear, disapproval, and alarm as well as a reluctant admiration” (Bryant 3). And we’ll also see that these two categories of badmen are not exclusive, especially when we consider the context of Henry’s and Lee’s lives. In either case, however, be it the badman model of the moral hard man or just the hard men, “[f]or all their differences, these badmen form a variegated profile for the times, a

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<sup>16</sup> See Lawrence W. Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom*

<sup>17</sup> See Roger D. Abrahams’ *Positively Black*.

projection of anger, frustration, and isolation under Jim Crow, of a simultaneous helplessness and power” (Bryant 16). In both Lee’s and Henry’s tales we can uncover this tension of helplessness and power represented in their outlaw roles and the reception of them, as well as the underlying issue of the individual’s freedom to act within or from the margin of a system structured to limit this freedom, hence the contradictory reluctant admiration of badmen who are more a threat to the community than outside it.

Nowhere in Stagolee’s myth is he represented as acting directly to subvert the system other than by means of claiming his own power to do so. On the surface, he appears to be an apolitical individualist acting with no concern for the effect his acts have on the community. And yet, his role takes on many forms that reflect the conditions of his and his community’s (the Deep Morgan district of St. Louis’ Third Ward) existence in the last decade of the nineteenth century. As Bryant summarizes, Stagolee is “sometimes a pitiless killer, sometimes an intrepid conqueror of the devil, and sometimes a childlike joker. At other times, though, he is a man of dark somberness, a figure of high romance, even tragedy, boxed into his fate . . . In these cases, he is no swaggerer but a great sufferer who is as intense in his anguish as he is in his heartless arrogance” (15). Overall, Cecil Brown sees the perpetuation of Lee’s myth as a “ritualistic performance” in the performative sense of Victor Turner’s concept of the social drama (7).

The ritual of performing Lee’s story occurs in a liminal social and cultural space, “set off from the ordinary, the mundane. Whether it takes place in a tobacco field or in the poolroom of a juke joint, it constitutes a privileged space and time” (Brown 7). The

tale occupies an epic space, one of legend that seems to disconnect it from any specific place or time, evident in a common opening verse that captures this mood:

It was on a dark  
And cold stormy night  
That Billy Lyons and Stackolee  
They had that awful fight (Bryant 15)

Other times the opening is more specific, but no less epic. The following variant sounds like a dark version of “‘Twas the Night before Christmas,” and despite the following verse, the shooting did actually occur the night before Christmas:

‘Twas a Christmas morning,  
The hour was about ten,  
When Stagalee shot Billy Lyons  
And landed in the Jefferson pen.  
O Lordy, po’ Stagalee! (Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads* 94)

In the standard tale that follows, Stagger Lee shoots Billy Lyons for daring to lay his hands on, spit on, or outright steal Lee’s Stetson hat—that is, after Lyons pleads for his life for the sake of his family. After Lee reclaims his hat, he’s arrested soon after, stands trial, and eventually, in a number of variations, ends up in hell.

Recounting a 1934 collecting trip with his father, Alan Lomax also characterizes a performance of the ballad as an “epic description of the quarrel between Stack Lee and Billy Lyon over a milk-white Stetson hat” (*Selected Writings* 20). While it’s not surprising he would speak of it in epic terms, the circumstances surrounding his

transcription of the performance—forty-one verses in all—highlights the almost ritualistic privileged space and time set apart from the norm, including the African American religious community and the law, which the ballad performance occupies. Alan and his father were constantly stymied when they attempted to record what the African American communities deemed “sinful” songs (i.e. worldly, non-religious songs), Alan being particularly interested in Stagolee ballads. Many of the church-going performers they spoke with knew the “sinful” songs from their younger days but would not perform them, afraid that they might meet community disapproval and have their church membership annulled. And even away from particularly religious communities, when the Lomaxes visited the New Orleans sporting district they found reticent performers in the barrel houses, most likely, Alan surmised, because of their police escort. Alan went back to the barrel-house area by himself with his typewriter one Saturday night and finally found somehow who knew and would perform the Stagolee ballad for him. And even then, they had to move from a large barroom (after the performer got through twenty verses) to a narrow barrel-house room with a solitary lamp and a battered piano (completing only one additional verse before they were kicked out, most likely because Alan Lomax was white), and finally, at three-thirty in the morning, they “found a piano in a quiet house and sent po’ Stack to hell, after he’d been shot eight times and hanged” (*Selected Writings* 20).

But what does Stagolee’s tale mean? As with all outlaw performances, Stagolee’s finds different meanings from group to group and shifts over time. The earliest renditions, however, were perhaps a chronicle of an altercation that captured the public’s

imagination because of Lee Shelton's notoriety in the Deep Morgan district as not only a pimp, but also a political figure. In fact, underworld activity and politics went hand in hand during this time. St. Louis political parties in the 1890s were not the type of parties we have today. They were more about who had power and could enforce it than actual politics. As Nathan Young explains, "Politics didn't mean what it means today. It wasn't so much about voting as about who was boss. And you made the law and had the gun at your side to enforce the law" (qtd. in Brown 83). At the time Shelton murdered Billy Lyons, Shelton was the president of the black Four Hundred Club, a political/social organization supporting the Democratic Party that, despite its illegal activities, posed a moral front. When Shelton was arrested for Lyons' murder, the club emphasized their moral program: the club was "organized for the moral and physical culture of young colored men. We contemplate no acts of violence, and as law-abiding citizens and voters we stand ready and willing to protect the laws of our city, State, and United States" (qtd. in Brown 43). Additionally, political social clubs were often associated with saloons and "lid clubs." Shelton's Four Hundred Club was linked to Bill Curtis' saloon, where Stagleee ended Billy Lyons' life. Shelton also owned a lid club called the Modern Horseshoe Club, which, in addition to being a successful nightclub (likely trafficking prostitutes), served the purpose of concealing illegal activities in the area (i.e. putting a lid on the activities). Billy Lyons, on the other hand, belonged to a Republican club associated with Henry Bridgewater's saloon, where five years earlier, a friend of Shelton's was murdered.

Needless to say, the Shelton/Lyons conflict had distinct reverberations in the district and even the newspapers speculated on the political and revenge motivations. But this context was all but forgotten by the time of Shelton's death in 1912, the original facts only discernible in the ballad by anyone who might have remembered the actual events. "By then," Greil Marcus argues, Lee Shelton "was already a specter in culture, a body irrelevant to the abstractions of his own myth, and nowhere near as real as his legend, with people in Memphis, New Orleans, Chicago, and New York already saying, 'Oh, Stacker Lee? Bad man, bad man, lived right here, don't know where he's gone'" (*Mystery Train* 232). As we saw with the classic outlaws, Lee Shelton in his folk persona becomes disconnected from a settled home in an even more tricksterish manner, appearing in folk cultures from New York to New Orleans. He took up residence wherever the specter of the badman was needed.

So what does the Stagolee epic say past the original context? On the symbolic level, the epic is about Lee's hat as embodying one's place in the world, an identity one carries rather than an identity found in the conventional idea of home as that private space where, ideally, one is free to live life on one's terms. As Bob Dylan puts it, "the song says that a man's hat is his crown," and that "no man gains immortality thru public acclaim" ("About the Songs" 3). A St. Louis newspaper account of the altercation between Lyons and Shelton highlights the importance of the hat in the story by reporting that Lee actually took Lyons' hat and broke it first, prompting Lyons to take Lee's. If a man's hat is his crown, it represents dominion over his individual space and agency to act to preserve his kingdom. It's not public acclaim that preserves this autonomy, but



rather, private power to live life as one chooses, thereby establishing a sort of immortality, a tradition almost, in the sense that it “implies the notion of balance between individual and collective expression” (Brown 186). In the end, Stagolee’s Stetson represents everything that can’t be taken away from an individual in the privileged space of the self.

Culturally, Lee’s tale can be read in a number of ways, too many, in fact, to cover here, but thoroughly addressed in Brown’s study of the Stagolee epic. The most obvious reading, however, is as a model of individual response to oppressive conditions for African Americans, which is the standard characterization of the badman figure in folklore. While not exactly a figure to be emulated throughout the community, the badman, in the sense of Abrahams’ “hard men,” represents the possibility of action, a potential freedom, albeit in the negative sense. John Henry, if we are to consider him as a representative of the “moral hard man,” on the other hand, represents a potential freedom in the positive sense. And indeed, Henry works so well within the system that the subversion implicit in his act is not only forgotten, but often touted as a victory for the working man over the forces of modernity.

If Henry’s underlying connection to the badman tradition isn’t clear enough in the echo of the John Henry ballad in a Stagolee variant, an even more pronounced confusion between Henry and a classic badman, John Hardy (a West Virginian outlaw who was hung in 1894), makes it somewhat clearer. In one John Hardy ballad variant, we see an evocation of the badman’s awareness of a fated death similar to the Henry and Stagolee variants above:

John Hardy was a little farmer boy,  
Sitting on his father's knee;  
Says he, "I fear the C & O Road  
Will be the ruination of me, poor boy!  
Will be the ruination of me. (Roberts 202)

No doubt, a major factor in the confusion between Hardy and Henry is most likely that their names so closely resemble each other. For decades, however, the confusion went deeper, with some folklorists and performers believing that Henry and Hardy were the same person, both the steel driving man and the outlaw who was hung for killing two men in a dispute over a poker game, apparently sometime after he beat the steam drill in his famous contest. It wasn't until the late 1920s that this confusion was somewhat cleared up. But the underlying connection between Henry, Hardy, and even Stagolee doesn't explain fully how Henry's legendary performance can be considered subversive or why he squarely fits in the outlaw tradition. Uncovering the historical and legal context of the events of Henry's life makes this clearer.

Following the Civil War, railroad construction across the country became even more fervent. When the last golden spike of the first transcontinental railroad was driven at Promontory Point, Utah in May 1869, the settling of the West was well on its way and this only sped up the settling. It was the crowning achievement of the railroad system that had been building up in the country since the 1830s. It also comes at a point where the favorable outlook of and wonderment at the railroad would take a turn toward a cynical view of railroads and banks. Along the way the railroad became an oppressive

force, dispossessing the public of lands, and even though it “became a key element in a newly emerging national social order after the Civil War, it still functioned in large part beyond the boundaries of existing law” (Gordon 191). During this time, railroad construction became a private, monopolistic enterprise. The hubris and greed of railroad barons such as Jay Gould and Jim Fisk trying to corner the gold market in order to raise freight profits led to the panic of 1873 and an economic depression that put many states in debt and many people out of work.

The legal no man’s land that the railroads occupied after the war was not the only problematic legal issue the country was dealing with at this time. Civil rights issues involving freedmen placed many African Americans in a legal limbo. John Henry was one of the people caught in this limbo. Until recently, there’s been no solid proof that John Henry was anything more than a myth created by railroad workers and miners. Scott Reynolds Nelson, however, has provided convincing evidence that not only might John Henry have been a real person, but that he was also a convict hired out of the Richmond Penitentiary to work for C. P. Huntington’s Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad. John Henry and hundreds of other convicts, along with the newly-invented steam drill that Henry defeated in a legendary battle of man versus machine, were part of the labor force responsible for tunneling through the mountains that stood in the railroad’s way.

The historical John Henry was an African American standing at just over five feet, not the mythic proportions his legend gave him, from New Jersey who found himself in legal trouble for the alleged robbery of William Wiseman’s “grocery” store at Blackwater Swamp in Prince George County, Virginia. There is no record of his arrest,

but judging by court records, Reynolds shows he was convicted of the crime sometime after the war in November 1866. The laws Henry would have been tried under, often referred to as Virginia “black codes,” had come into existence at the end of the Civil War when the Virginia legislature enacted a number of “harsh laws against black people, including a vagrancy law that made it a crime for black men and women to be without employers. Black people were not allowed to testify against whites, and the punishment for property crimes increased drastically” (Nelson 53).<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, there is some doubt if Henry would have been tried fairly in an environment that saw the newly-free African Americans as a nuisance to be dealt with rather than a group who needed assistance in making a new start. The black codes he was arrested under, which substituted employer for slavemaster, were, however, declared unconstitutional by the Civil Rights Act of 1866. By the time of his trial, Henry’s case came under jurisdiction of the federal courts. Thus Henry’s case occurred during a time of legal limbo where, during the time between his arrest and trial, “the relationship between Southern courts and the federal government appeared to have changed. Twice” (Nelson 55). This situation led to a problematic ambiguity of the charges against Henry. Under the black codes his crime would have been considered a felony, but because of the overturning of black laws as unconstitutional, anyone found to be enforcing them would have also been

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<sup>18</sup> The increase in conviction of African Americans for property crimes during the time of Henry’s incarceration is quite apparent. According to Reynolds’ findings, 80 percent of the African Americans imprisoned in the Richmond Penitentiary were convicted of property crimes: “Of the 761 in the penitentiary in 1870 (the first year statistics were tabulated after the war), approximately 600 were in jail for burglary, theft, housebreaking, horse and mule stealing, or grand larceny” (Reynolds 63, 181-82 n. 8)

brought up on charges. In the end, Henry was convicted of “housebreaking” in order to classify his crime as a felony under the new laws after “black codes” were abolished.<sup>19</sup> Henry received a sentence of ten years in the Richmond Penitentiary.

Even if the John Henry ballads and “hammer” songs that are related to his story suggest a rugged individualist triumph over modernity, or perhaps even a celebration of American work ethic, it’s still very much a cautionary tale. Henry’s death is a constant reminder for workers who might be singing about his death as a work song in rhythm with their hammers to slow down or their hammer work will kill them too: “In the context of the traditions around the John Henry story and the hammer songs, this seemed less a story about praise than a chilling song about death—a song that men at work sang to warn themselves about the dangers of overwork” (Nelson 31). On the surface of the John Henry tale, which has permeated all forms of American folklore, John Henry “is the hero representing resistance to technological innovations that threaten unemployment to those with traditional manual skills. And since the lowest manual laborers were the blacks, the industrial revolution threatened them more than any other class” (Cohen 74). Now that the details of John Henry’s life and death have come to light this interpretation

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<sup>19</sup> To prosecute Henry’s crime as a felony it would have to be proved that he had stolen more than twenty dollars worth of goods. Any less would be considered a misdemeanor. As Reynolds notes, however, this would have been next to impossible since an auditor’s record showed that the total goods in Wiseman’s store were only worth fifty dollars, ten of which accounted for the price of two hogs at five dollars apiece. Thus, Henry’s burglary charge, under the new laws, meant that even if he was guilty he could only be charged a misdemeanor for shoplifting. During Henry’s first circuit court trial date the prosecutor, considering the problematic nature of the charges, sought to try the crime as housebreaking and larceny, which would then be considered a felony. The trial was held over for another six months for the prosecutor to make his case, and he finally did, which led to the conviction of John Henry for housebreaking. The basis of the charge suggested that the small building Wiseman operated as a grocery was also the residence of his family.

becomes quite problematic. Henry was forced into this position by an unstable (and no doubt racist) legal system and extra legal powers of the railroad authorities who exploited prisoner labor at a fraction of the cost that it would've had to pay regular laborers.

While the railroads hired other laborers, it was the convicts who did some of the most hazardous work. John Henry, after all, dies sometime after his race with the steam drill, and while the tale suggests that his death was a result of exhausting himself in the contest, history suggests differently. More likely, Henry died due to health complications resulting from the inhalation of silica particles that clouded the air from drilling.

Whether or not John Henry died at the tunnel camp or was shipped back to the Richmond Penitentiary due to ailments, evidence suggests that he was buried in a large unmarked grave on the prison grounds.<sup>20</sup> Archaeologists discovered such an unmarked grave in 1992 when some of the penitentiary buildings were torn down. Nearly “three hundred skeletons had been discovered . . . next to the old white house in the penitentiary,” John Henry’s likely resting place: buried in the sand (Nelson 37).

Henry’s possible final resting place is quite symbolic in a number of ways which suggest the liminal space his body and legend occupy, like that of Stagolee’s, in his outlaw status and national myth. It’s a symbolic place of American (particularly African American) experience in flux, a “black hole” that renders the subject invisible, yet a space “massive in its energies, erasing old law, nullifying time and space in its

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<sup>20</sup> Henry would have been returned dead or alive since any prisoners not returned would cost the railroad a one hundred dollar penalty fee.

singularity” (Baker 151).<sup>21</sup> As discussed, Henry’s tale in ballad versions and hammer songs displays an interpretive tension between viewing his story as a heroic feat aiding in American progress or a tale of warning against overwork and exploitation. In many versions of the ballad, John Henry boasts of his steel driving prowess, but there is also Henry’s recognition or clairvoyance that “the hammer’ll be the death of me” (Cohen 61-2). Yet, he faces his impending death head on. In hammer songs, however, such as “Spike Driver Blues,” which are related to Henry’s story, but most often from the perspective of some other worker after the legend of Henry had spread, the speaker recognizes the possibility of death and doesn’t wish to accept it: “This is the hammer that killed John Henry / But it won’t kill me . . . That’s why I’m gone” (Smith, *Anthology* Track 80). In general, railroad expansion across America can be viewed as marking an ambivalent tension similar to these songs. Not only were the railroads making possible American progress, but also, acting within an ambiguous legal space, their expansion resulted in exploitation of people and land.

Consider, then, the image of “the white house” often recalled in John Henry ballads, including Lead Belly’s version quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Now that Nelson has presented a viable referent for this symbol, what was once an ambiguous, but suggestive, reference becomes more complicated. Because “white house” is appended with “the” as its article, it suggests that the white house reference is a matter of general knowledge, possibly referring to *the* White House in Washington, D.C. The reference to

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<sup>21</sup> Houston Baker sees this black hole as a useful trope for interpreting the achievement of African American texts from a vernacular perspective.

the symbol of American power is certainly not explicit, but in light of the ambiguous nature of the reference and the implications of John Henry's story as a heroic sacrifice in the name of American progress it's not out of the question. In fact, one version of "John Henry" John Lomax field-recorded as sung by an Arkansas convict named Arthur Bell makes this connection:

They took John Henry to Washin'ton  
An' they buried him in th' sand,  
An' th' people from the East and the people from th' West.  
Came to see such a steel-drivin' man. (J. Lomax, *Ballad Hunter* 149)

Before Nelson's discovery of the link to the Richmond Penitentiary building one might interpret that John Henry was buried at the White House as a national hero. Or possibly, in another verse referencing the white house, John Henry was hired as an agent of American progress:

They brought John Henry from the white house  
And took him to the tunnel to drive,  
He drove so hard he broke his heart,  
He laid down his hammer and he died. (Nelson 29)

Again, this could be interpreted as a representation of the American will to succeed. In light of Nelson's findings, however, we can now interpret John Henry as an unwilling agent of both national law and railroad power. Even if "the white house" refers to the penitentiary the implication of the national seat of power and law is still present. It suggests that the outlaw was used, rather exploited, for the benefit of national progress.



John Henry's legendary performance and the performances of workers and musicians singing John Henry's tale ever since his death represent yet another ambiguous line negotiated in the settling of America: "That which is expelled to the margins of society in a practical sense—the flotsam of modernity—becomes symbolic for the society that is expelling it" (Cresswell 17). It's within the ambiguous space of this line that the outlaws remain, are relegated to, a type of frontier justice that opens the way for some and excludes others, accentuating the fact that questions of law and justice are malleable concepts adapted for the benefit of those in power.

There's another connotation of "the white house" that speaks to the malleability of the law and dispossession of home. The white house referenced in the ballad may be familiar, but there's no sense of connection or belonging to it, for it's not a home, but a house, just as the White House isn't really a home, but a temporary residence for rotating presidents. "Home" would suggest rootedness, an identity, and needless to say, the three hundred unidentified bodies that were dug up give no clue to their identity other than the fact that they may have all been African American prisoners. There's no report of John Henry's death, only the conspicuous disappearance of his name—his body rendered invisible—in the prison records after 1873, and the lore of his death. And while he may have been buried at the white house he was far from home, asking for a cool drink of water before he died—and dies over and over again through the performance of others. If he did indeed die on the railroad line, it's fitting that his story continues to travel in that space in flux in which all folk outlaws seem to exist, with the law still hounding them.

The public reception and perpetuation of Henry's tale, too, is a perfect example of the outlaw tradition. It, like the stories of Stagolee, Jesse James, and Billy the Kid, demonstrates an ambiguous—perhaps, more rightly, ambivalent—American cultural treatment of the outlaw, which reflects an American cultural identity—a sense of its self—that is just as ambivalent. The reception of Henry's tale is a good example both because of its success as a popular myth and its complete masking of its subversive nature. It's telling that John Henry's character has changed little over the last century, the John Hardy confusion aside, and I suggest that it's partly because his outlaw status was forgotten. But John Henry's battle against the steam drill does make him an outlaw. He may have been forced to do work, but not to “play” in a contest. In some ways we can read the contest in terms of trickster tales that originated in slavery, particularly the John and Old Master cycle where John's talents are continually boasted about by the Old Master even though John has merely deceived him into thinking he has special powers. Rather than playing the victim of the system, John Henry made a name for himself (real or not) despite the system. He wouldn't lie anonymously like so many others in that grave of three hundred skeletons.

Also, we need to consider John Henry in the context of the work song. Rhythmically, the popular ballad form of John Henry is not a work song; at least, not since the earliest versions. It's too upbeat, too fast. Anyone working to this rhythm would surely “break their heart” with the strain. Oppose the song to the “hammer songs” that John Henry appears in after his death, such as “Spike Drivers Blues,” and the difference in work rhythm is obvious. In fact, in a performance like Mississippi John

Hurt's, with its melodic and almost other-worldly ease and assurance of resigning oneself not only to a slow and steady work pace, but also to refuse to work at all, goes in the opposite direction of "John Henry" with its rolling, train-speeding-up rhythm that seems as though it can't stop unless the train derailed, or, as in the case of Henry, its heart bursts. Thus, we have John Henry as a figure who disrupts notions of indentured work by claiming it as his own sport, a way to prove his personal worth, and who disrupts the collective rhythm of the work song, shoving it aside for individual rhythm of work. In some ways this might be looked down upon by other workers, but Henry is not forcing others to work at his speed. In fact, he is doing the work for them. In every way, Henry is disrupting the status quo, in purpose and rhythm. But to what end? In one sense, it results in a performance like Hurt's, which gives the speaker the authority to say he won't work. Considering Lead Belly's version of the hammer song, "Take This Hammer," also brings to the forefront issues of being treated like a human whose pride can't take any more insult:

I don't want no . . . cold iron shackles . . .

Around my leg . . .

I don't want no corn bread, peas and molasses

Hurts my pride . . . (*The Leadbelly Songbook* 45)

But in another sense you have John Henry as the outlaw hammering against a society that would, and did, make him an outcast, both in the sense of rising modernity and his worth as a citizen. In one instance, you can have the heroic Henry that bluesmen like

Bukka White sing about celebrating Henry's other-worldly achievement with just a hint of elegiac feeling on his death. And then we have a further improvisation of this theme in something like Pete Seeger's and Lee Hays' (The Weavers 1949) "If I Had a Hammer (The Hammer Song)," where John Henry is not present, but the mythic proportion of his act is invoked in hammering out justice for everyone. In the end, John Henry, who was literally considered an outlaw, also performed the role of the folk outlaw, a "moral hard man" in the badman tradition, in his refusal to work both wholly on someone else's terms and within the status quo. In true outlaw fashion he disrupts both and provides a mythic example for others to do the same.

In many ways, Henry's hammer can be seen in the same light as Stagolee's Stetson: a symbol suggesting that one's place in the world can be claimed no matter the conditions, that one's social worth need not be dictated by those in power. While John Henry's mythical body traveled the railroad lines (and mine shafts) and his hammer kept at its work after his death sometime around 1873, many other uprooted people were riding the rails looking for a job, something to eat, or just to keep from getting arrested for vagrancy. And yet these poor boys, newly classified as tramps, were able to claim their existence as their own amidst the ambiguity of the law and of their outcast place in society.

## The Tramp and other Gentlemen of the Road

About the time John Henry died, America was entering a depression, brought on, in part, by the rapid growth of the railroads. A similar depression after a recession in 1882, considered to be the worst that America had ever experienced until the Great Depression, would follow in 1893, also partly attributed to another boom in railroad construction. Again, the speculation and above-the-law greed of railroads would be a key factor in rising unemployment and exploitation of people and land. During the former depression, the “tramp” came into existence in America. As Paul T. Ringenbach, Tim Cresswell, and Todd DePastino suggest, the unemployed homeless figure in America was certainly not a new phenomenon, but the large numbers of unemployed that appeared during the 1873 depression caught the nation’s attention and incited a tramp scare, particularly in the Midwest and Northeast.

Cresswell, following Ringenbach, argues that it was during this time that the tramp was “made” with a rhetoric surrounding his figure that was antithetical to American ideals of home and progress (in the form of will to succeed). In an increasingly urban industrial society, the tramp figure symbolized the rupture between the emerging society and the old as well as middle-class anxieties about the shifting culture and society. As “both victims and agents of the new economic system,” DePastino explains, tramps were “itinerant laborers clinging beneath the speeding freight train of industrial capitalist expansion. Because they seemed strange and placeless . . . tramps served as convenient screens onto which middle-class Americans projected their

insecurities, anxieties, and fantasies about urban industrial life” (4). Conversely, however, tramps claimed their placeless identity as theirs, creatively improvising on traditions of the romantic notion of tramping and frontier individualism, further feeding middle-class anxieties and challenging the stability of the conventional home and social structure. In his many forms throughout the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the tramp “forged a swaggering counterculture known as ‘hobohemia’ that defied, unsettled, and eventually transformed everything Americans mean by home” (DePastino xviii). Thus at each turn in American society and culture from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era and the Great Depression, some version of the tramp “appeared at the threshold . . . signal[ing] a crisis of home that was also one of nationhood and citizenship, race and gender” (DePastino xix).<sup>22</sup>

When tramps first caught the nation’s attention—often characterized as a problem that appeared out of nowhere—farm journals of the time likened the tramps to swarms of locusts infesting the land (Ringebach 3). The symbolic infestation of the land also led to what Cresswell calls “pathologizing the tramp” (110). The mobility of the tramp was interpreted by some as a result of a wanderlust disease, and eugenicists accounted for the tramps’ inability to succeed in the world as a natural defect in their genetic makeup. For theorists attempting to understand the tramp problem during a time when the American gospel of success was pervasive, there clearly was something

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<sup>22</sup> While I am using *tramp*, *hobo*, and *bum* interchangeably in this section it should be noted that distinctions were often made among the three classifications. This section, however, is interested in the overall character of the type created in the late nineteenth century and the legal and cultural turns this figure takes, as well as the folklore surrounding the transient figure.

physically or mentally wrong with these men. There was “[n]o reason . . . for a man to become a tramp. Hard work and diligence, combined with thrift, could make all Americans successes” (Ringebach 4). Cresswell argues that in addition to interpreting the tramp figure as diseased, including a common perception that they were often carriers of syphilis, or genetically inferior, “the connection of tramps with syphilis simultaneously drew correlations between the physical body of the tramp and the metaphorical body of American democracy” (129). Ironically, Woody Guthrie, quite the tramp himself at times, recorded a public announcement program about the dangers of syphilis for the U. S. Department of Health in the 1940s in which he played Rusty the Lonesome Traveler and opens the fifteen minute skit with a performance of “Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done (The Great Historical Bum).” The health threat to the American body coupled with the moral threat to the American family and home essentially resulted in viewing tramps as social outlaws.

As was the case with Billy the Kid, these outlaws needed to be dealt with, even exterminated, if America was to keep its progressive push on track: theorists and the media not realizing, of course, that the tramp problem was partly a result of this progress. Public opinion on how to deal with the tramp scare ranged from treating tramps like animals and poisoning their food with arsenic to following Russia’s example and sending tramps to work camps (Cresswell 9). Later, during the Dust Bowl era, sterilization of migrant workers from the dust bowl region would be a suggested and practiced solution to ridding the country of the problem. Extreme measures aside, the legal system attempted to curb the tramp scare by instituting Tramp Laws, the first of

which, in 1876, was passed in New Jersey. Similar vagrancy laws had been in existence since the founding of America. The Virginia black codes included such a vagrancy law, making it “a crime for black men and women to be without employers” (Nelson 53). Punishment for breaking vagrancy laws “could be particularly severe when applied to black wanderers. Vagrancy and tramp laws in Southern states were frequently used to sell black people into servitude, thus reintroducing slavery through the back door” (Cresswell 39). These new Tramp Laws, however, were primarily designed “to counter the threat of the industrial poor gathering in . . . cities during economic downturns hoping for relief” (Cresswell 51). More Tramp Laws would follow New Jersey’s lead, but the laws were further broadened to target labor agitators of any kind. The New York Tramp Act in 1879 “was used to arrest and repress working-class organizers and agitators who were often moving between sites of industrial struggle and could thus easily be described as ‘tramps’” (Cresswell 51). Even though these laws were increasingly exploited to support a “pro-business police force as a form of class control” the overall spirit of vagrancy and Tramp Laws was upheld: elimination of anything standing in the way of American progress (Cresswell 51).

But let’s pause for a moment on the implications of writing laws that make it possible to prosecute a vagrant or tramp. For lawmakers, a “tramp was defined as an idle person without employment, a transient person who roamed from place to place, and who had no lawful occasion to wander” (Cresswell 50). Perhaps the most problematic issue with these laws is how antithetical they are to American ideals of freedom of mobility, and in some ways these laws represent an effort to re-instate Old World



peasantry, according to which peasants were tied to the land without recourse to social or geographic mobility. American Tramp Laws suggest that only certain groups of people are lawfully allowed to move about freely and only within the space of what would be considered “normal” traveling. And just what constitutes “lawful occasion to wander”? Another problematic issue is that vagrancy, or being a tramp, is not a crime that is committed. A tramp breaks the law simply by being a tramp or vagrant, which is a classification created by the law. As Cresswell notes, “The ‘crime’ of vagrancy is importantly not a quality of an act a vagrant commits but a consequence of the application of rules and sanctions to an offender. Law and legal definitions created the legal type *vagrant*, just as it would the legal type *tramp*” (56). If one cannot give a good enough account of oneself, have enough money, or look “normal” when traveling one may be called a tramp and become subject to prosecution. Of course, the black codes and Jim Crow laws were similar in this regard, but the Tramp Laws are more transitory. For instance, a person who has a job one day, but is laid off the next and travels somewhere else looking for a job becomes a tramp by circumstance. This person could say he is looking for a job and therefore has “lawful occasion to wander,” but how is he going to prove it, especially if he’s riding a train in an abnormal manner because he doesn’t have the money to buy a ticket?

The manner in which tramps rode the rails is symbolic of the way American progress excluded some groups, expanding and limiting freedom of movement through transitory law: that which changes according to circumstance and relies on categorizations of normal and abnormal. Think about the awkward newlyweds from

Stephen Crane's story riding in the plush parlor car which symbolizes civilization coming to the frontier. Now picture the various ways tramps may have been riding on that same train. They may have caught an open box car, like Guthrie's "soldiers in the dust," and enjoyed the safest way for them to travel, or they may have had to ride on the outside of the train: underneath the train on "the rods" (the most dangerous method), between the cars, or on top (where Guthrie ends up once the fight erupts). The train as an agent of American progress and modernity carries those excluded and exploited as well as those who benefit, making the differences clear in the way they rode the train. The railroad line, as noted earlier, was itself representative of legal ambiguity and led to many issues of law enforcement between the railroad and towns along the way. Tramps were caught between railroad law and town law: "Railroad leaders were adamant that responsibility for disciplining vagrants laid with local jurisdiction . . . The towns along the route, on the other hand, believed that it was unjust for their communities to be made responsible for the cost of maintaining tramps in jails and workhouses" (Cresswell 29). As a result, railroad police were ushering vagrants off the train, sometimes by violent and deadly means, and town law enforcement was either trying to get others on the trains to rid the town of the problem or simply giving the tramp no choice but to hop a train and move on unless they wanted to be thrown in jail.

But if tramps represented the marginalized or excluded in the process of American progress and industrialization, they were a homogenous group of outcasts. Overwhelmingly, in fact and cultural representation, tramps were primarily white males who symbolically represented an overly masculine society to counter a feminized

middle-class society. Women, nonwhites, and recent immigrant groups—although they could certainly be found tramping the road or hitching rides in a boxcar—were excluded from this culturally mythologized group even as organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IBWA) attempted to bypass these distinctions altogether (without actually including the excluded groups) by making class the focus of the tramp’s political struggle at the turn of the century. What’s more, Tramp Laws essentially excluded blacks and women from this classification as well. African Americans were excluded, in the South anyway, by virtue of the much harsher Jim Crow laws that would have been applied to black male vagrants. These laws so stifled black mobility in general that aside from the general racial bigotry found in tramp culture, blacks generally did not take to the road in the same manner as tramps or interact with the same communities.

The legal exclusion of women from being considered tramps was, on the surface, a technical matter. Tramp Laws defined tramps as male, completely excluding the possibility of a woman being a tramp. A 1902 Connecticut Tramp Law stipulated that the law could not be applied to women, minors (those under 16), the blind or “local” beggars (hence, highlighting the perceived threat of the tramps’ mobility). An 1897 Iowa code stated similar provisions while including the stipulation of a man’s necessary physical capability of working: “Any male person, sixteen years of age or over, physically able to perform manual labor, who is wandering about, practicing common begging, or having no visible calling or business to maintain himself, and is unable to show reasonable efforts in good faith to secure employment, is a tramp” (qtd. in

Cresswell 92-3). Sparing women and children from prosecution under tramp laws was anything but chivalrous. Many could not conceive of the possibility of a woman tramp. Often, they'd be characterized as prostitutes instead. Not only had the rhetoric surrounding the figure of the tramp painted him as masculine and diseased, but the essential characteristics of the tramp's moral "offenses" against decent society, his mobility and unemployment, were not essential to the social role of women. Women were supposed to be "employed" at home, and "the possibility of female tramps caused a great deal of anxiety, for they appeared to have transgressed many of the boundaries that separated the masculine world from the feminine one," including the ideal home (Cresswell 88).

The social issues that revolved around the tramp figure in the Gilded Age inevitably led to political issues. In the first decade of the twentieth century the IWW and IBWA politicized the tramp's role in society and culture, seeking "to use the hobo's raw counterculture as a lever to advance their large labor and socialist agendas" (DePastino 112). As noted, while political organizations shifted focus to class issues, subsuming racial, ethnic, and gender issues, the dominant cultural makeup of hobohemia was single white males, engendering, especially in the case of the Wobbly (IWW) folklore, a "masculine proletarian iconography" (DePastino 121). In much of the iconography, especially political cartoons, large, muscular and powerful white men are pictured facing class issues and conflicts. This portrayal, or "fetish," of white masculinity grew to larger proportions by the 1920s, linking the hobo folklore to "an authentic example of white frontier Americana, making little reference to the social and

economic conditions of migratory labor” (DePastino 126). In fact, the identification of the American frontier spirit with the tramp even led to a distinction between western and eastern hoboes, implying another gendered dialectic where the symbolically civilized and feminized East stands counter to the masculine and savage (viewed positively in this construction) West.

In the western frontier characterization of the tramp there’s obviously a link to the archetypal outlaw. The tramp, like the western desperado, displayed a “primitivism and lack of civilized restraint” that appealed to popular culture as evidenced in the work of those who popularized the romantic mythologizing of the tramp, such as Jack London, Carl Sandburg, and later, Jack Kerouac, vaudevillian performers, and the scores of folk balladeers and songsters most prominently represented in the IWW’s *Little Red Songbook* (DePastino 116). Obviously, the performance of the tramp and his folklore didn’t always portray him in terms of the frontier spirit, but the tension between primitivism and civilization is always present. The comic tramp performances at the beginning of the twentieth century served almost the same role as the blackface performances of the earlier century, performed at times side by side in early vaudeville acts. No doubt, comic representations of the tramp were intended to be nearly as derogatory as blackface representations, but they also implicitly highlighted a primitive, carefree life unbound from social obligations such as the conventional home and a nine to five job. The “love and theft” of audience and performers alike of the hobo’s folk mythology also compounds a thick sense of irony and creative playfulness found in many of the songs created in hobohemia.

Hobohemia, one might say, has two anthems: “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum” and “Big Rock Candy Mountain.” The first is an ironic celebration of being a bum. Somewhat more than a grin-and-bear-it mentality, the song suggests that, even if given a choice, the man singing “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum” would prefer the bum’s life over any other. Nevertheless, the song has a pointed sarcasm toward the social life from which they’re outcast. The song opens with society asking the bum a question: “Oh, why don’t you work / Like other men do?” To which the bum replies, “How the hell can I work / When there’s no work to do?” Then the chorus of ironic celebration follows:

Hallelujah, I’m a bum,

Hallelujah, bum again,

Hallelujah, give us a handout,

To revive us again. (Sandburg, *American Songbag* 185)

The irony, with an edge of sarcasm, continues throughout the song. In another verse, the hobo jests, “Oh I love my boss / And my boss loves me, / And that is the reason / I’m so hungry” (Sandburg, *American Songbag* 185). But another verse undercuts the implied dissatisfaction by claiming the bum life as a preferred mode of existence, free from social and economic responsibility:

When springtime does come,

O won’t we have fun,

We’ll throw up our jobs

And we’ll go on the bum. (Sandburg, *American Songbag* 185)

While there's no distinct destination in mind when one goes "on the bum," there is a mythical place one might dream of going: the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

The promised land of hobo existence, Big Rock Candy Mountain is, as Hal Rammel suggests, a utopian "nowhere" where the entire life and landscape is tailored to the hobo's mode of existence:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,  
There's a land that's fair and bright,  
Where the handouts grow on bushes  
And you sleep out every night.  
Where the boxcars all are empty,  
And the sun shines every day—  
Oh, the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees,  
The rock and rye springs where the whangdoodle sings,  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountain. (Milburn 87-88)

And it couldn't be more fitting for a hobo's version of the medieval Land of Cockaigne to be disconnected from any real place, creating a mythic space where social convention and restrictions are disrupted. In this mythic space—liminal somewhat in the way social drama and ritual like carnival or Mardi Gras create a space where social convention and quotidian life is inverted—anything that might be an obstacle to the hobo is removed: cops have wooden legs, bulldogs have wooden teeth, hens lay soft-boiled eggs, nobody works, and the physical environment provides everything the hobo needs, found in the twin lakes of gin (or whiskey) and stew and streams of whiskey along with the cigarette

trees. Note that the song makes no mention of any conventional housing, and yet, one can feel so at home in this nowhere that there's no need of changing socks or remaining in a jail cell if one doesn't feel like it. One might think the nowhere of Big Rock Candy Mountain seems outlandish, but is it really any more mythologized than conventional views of Manifest Destiny, romanticism of the frontier, or the American Dream?

Robert Park, a sociologist at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, argues that songs celebrating the lore of the tramp, hobo, or bum “belonged to a bygone age of restless individualism and enterprise when the hobo's ‘romantic temperament’ had fueled frontier development” (DePastino 129). Perhaps not coincidentally, both “Hallelujah, I'm a Bum” and “Big Rock Candy Mountain” most likely emerged just as the end of the frontier was a topic of discussion. In fact, both songs are often attributed to Harry “Haywire Mac” McClintock, an IWW member who claimed to have written the songs in the 1890s while he was “on the bum.” Ironically, the restless individualism and romantic temperament displayed in songs like these and looked upon nostalgically by American society at the turn of the century is embodied by the figure who is an outcast. But for some, viewing the outcast as a representative of America's frontier spirit critiqued the contemporary society.

Cowboy poet Henry Herbert Knibbs' *Songs of the Outlands: Ballads of the Hoboes and Other Verse* (1914) portrays the hobo in such a manner. Knibbs' collection of poems supposedly centering on hoboes implies more of a nostalgia for the frontier than specifically a celebration of the hobo. But even in the seemingly violent yoking together of the hobo and the cowboy, Knibbs calls attention to the ironic link between



the two as if the hobo has become the cowboy's legacy (or future), symbolically suggested in "On the Range":

My pony was standin' thinkin' deep;  
Can hosses think? Well, I reckon so!  
And I was squattin', half asleep,  
When into the firelight stepped a Bo. (53)

This mysterious hobo almost appears as a prophet to the cowboy, and he "sort of listened for him to say / What was comin'" (53). Or perhaps the hobo is not so much a prophet as a philosopher critiquing society, such as in "The Grand Old Privilege":

Folks say we got no morals — that they all fell in the soup;  
And no conscience — so the would-be goodies say  
And perhaps our good intentions did just up an flew the coop,  
While we stood around and watched 'em fade away. (49)

No matter what society might say about tramps or hoboes, however, they still possess the "grand old privilege" that the contemporary society is lacking, "to chuck our luck and choose / Any road at any time for anywhere" (49).

But even with songs and poems celebrating the hobo's individualism and freedom, others highlight the tramp's outlaw existence, which he can't escape even if he wanted to, such as "Only a Tramp":

They tell me to work for a living,  
And not through the country to stamp;  
And yet, when I ask for employment,

They say I am only a tramp. (Cohen 348).

“Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, Keep on A-Tramping” likewise notes the obstacles a tramp faces on the road as an outcast in economic, religious, and legal contexts. In the first verse, the tramp happens upon a woman cooking stew and asks if he might chop wood for some of the stew. The woman answers:

"Tramp, tramp, tramp, keep on a-trampin', There is nothing here for you;

If I catch you round again, You will wear the ball and chain,

Keep a-trampin', that's the best thing you can do." (Sandburg, *American Songbag* 185)

The tramp gets the same response when he sees a sign that reads “Work for Jesus” and prays until his knees are sore only to have the preacher deny him any food. And in the final verse, a jail cell isn’t even an option for shelter and food after the tramp is arrested by a policeman but turned loose by the judge because “bums that have no money need not come around” (Sandburg, *American Songbag* 185).

But not all appeals of hoboes are rejected, especially if they can display their talent and present their case in a creative manner. Blind Willie McTell’s “Travelin’ Blues” demonstrates such an occasion. After successfully getting some food from a woman he charms by calling her “grandma,” he hears a train in the distance. He sings to the engineer hoping to get a ride, but the engineer rejects him: “I wouldn't mind it, fella, but you know this train ain't mine.” Finally, however, he gets the engineer’s sympathy:

[SPOKEN] Then I go along further and

Began to sing “Poor Boy” to him

And he began to smile in my face.

[SINGS] Get up, fella. Ride all 'round the world

Get up, fella. Ride all 'round the world

Poor boy, you ain't got no girl. (*Classic Years* CD 1 Track 11)

In singing “Poor Boy” to the engineer, the hobo gains sympathy by pleading his homelessness and his loneliness, perhaps speaking to feelings the engineer has concerning being away from home and his girl, Emery. Additionally, with the hobo’s performance of “Poor Boy,” he’s not only speaking to the cultural and creative milieu of hobohemia, but also the more general milieu of the folk outlaw and his uprootedness.

### Poor Boy Long Ways from Home

Considered to be one of the oldest songs in the blues tradition, “Poor Boy Long Ways from Home” (also known as “Poor Boy Blues”) is a solitary testimony accompanied by slide guitar traveling along with each word like a ghost of some unsettling, inescapable past or harbinger of some uncertain, unattainable future. According to Gus Cannon, an early Mississippi bluesman born in 1883, this style of playing didn’t appear until the turn of the century, along with the ubiquitous solitary verse of “Poor Boy,” which repeats some variation of “I’m a poor boy, long ways from

home.”<sup>23</sup> Not only was the music something new and strange-sounding, but the sentiment stressing disconnection from (or possibly dispossession of) home was antithetical to the American century-long emphasis on settling the home that resulted in the end of the frontier. As Todd DePastino notes, “As far back as the early nineteenth century, Americans had so valued the balancing functions of home that a ‘cult of domesticity’ had emerged to inundate the nation with advice manuals, song sheets, and prints of genre scenes celebrating family life” (25). People set down roots across the continent. Homes were made on the range, so many that the frontier had finally been settled, transforming the savage land into civilized abodes. By the end of the nineteenth century the physical fact of the frontier and promise it represented became a romanticized memory of the nation’s heritage, a heritage that the perpetually forward-looking nation was looking back on for the first time.

Yet, at the end of the nineteenth century when “Home, Sweet Home” was played on many a parlor piano or perhaps a framed needlework of these words hung on the parlor wall, there were thousands of transients without homes riding the rails and early Mississippi bluesmen singing in repetition, a laconic chant, of their estranged homes. “Poor Boy” could be the anthem of the outlaw, dispossessed or disconnected from home. It’s the anthem of the travelers to “nowhere” stealing away on the train to glory. The repetition of this sentiment is imbued with the sense that no matter what the poor boy or

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<sup>23</sup> As Robert Palmer notes, the slide guitarist Cannon heard while living near Clarksdale, Mississippi was Alec or Alex Lee, whose repertoire included “John Henry” and “Poor Boy,” two of the earliest slide guitar songs, played by sliding a bottleneck or knife across the strings (Palmer 46).

outlaw does, he or she will never get settled, never get back home. Bob Dylan seconds this sentiment in “Po’ Boy,” improvising on the “poor boy” tradition a century later. In the verse quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Dylan conflates the solitary disconnection from a society that the poor boy works so hard to be included in only to be associated, in a nuanced play with an idiomatic phrase, with the devil (like the Kid) and the stereotypical outlaw dressed in black, with the police always at his back. In addition to the literal poor boys of the late nineteenth-century “tramp scare,” who were perceived as diseased or an ominous threat to home, recall the claim of Billy the Kid: “They wouldn’t let me settle down” (Utley 166). Or, Jesse James’ complaint: “They wouldn’t let me stay at home, and what else can I do?” (Stiles 299) And think about John Henry buried, not in his home state of New Jersey, or in Washington, D.C. at the White House, but alongside the white house of the Richmond Penitentiary with three hundred other African American convicts. The sentiment of “Poor Boy” gets to the heart of the outlaw, an archetype that’s apart from and a part of America. “Poor Boy,” then, is the national anthem of the outlaw’s metaphoric home: the old, weird America.

But what is the old, weird America? In the next chapter we’ll consider Greil Marcus’ phrase used to describe the America represented by Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* and the draw/repulsion of “weirdness” in American heritage, culture, and folk music. In keeping with the railroad theme that has steamed its way through this chapter we can begin thinking about what the old, weird America represents by considering W. C. Handy’s memorable account of the first blues he ever heard. Late one night in the Tutwiler, Mississippi train station, half asleep waiting for the train,

Handy awoke to the sound of a ragged-looking man playing slide guitar with a knife and singing “Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog.” He repeated the line three times “accompanying himself with the weirdest music [Handy] had ever heard” (Handy 73-74). The episode also demonstrates the sorrowful experience at the root of black music, where “[t]he well of sorrow from which Negro music is drawn is also a well of mystery” (Handy 35). Literally, what the man was singing about was where the Yazoo Delta and Southern railroad lines crossed tracks in Moorhead, Mississippi. Metaphorically, this moment that inspired Handy to compose his first “blues” song and the space of the railroad crossing (or a crossroad in general) is a glimpse into the old, weird America. The potential violence represented by the sliding knife, the transient musician appearing almost as a mysterious dream to Handy, the metaphoric crossroads, a place of comings and goings that’s no place at the same time, the creative improvisation of the moment that Handy seized upon: it all characterizes the marginal world of the old, weird America and the outlaws that were made with it in the making of America.

### CHAPTER III

#### ANTHOLOGIZING OUTLAW TERRITORY AND UNSETTLING AMERICA: REVISITING FOLK TRADITION AND THE OLD, WEIRD AMERICA

I'm a poor, lonesome cowboy,

I'm a poor, lonesome cowboy,

I'm a poor, lonesome cowboy,

And a long ways from home.

—Anonymous “Poor Lonesome Cowboy” (J. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs*  
[1910] 32)

Oh, what was your name in the States?

Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates?

Did you murder your wife

And fly for your life?

Say, what was your name in the States?

—Anonymous “What Was Your Name in the States?” (Sandburg,  
*American Songbag* 106)

Kill yourself!

—Uncle Dave Macon “Way Down the Old Plank Road” (Smith,  
*Anthology* Track 78)

In a live tradition we fall in love with the spirits of the dead.

—Lewis Hyde (*The Gift* 253)

In Ramblin' Thomas' version of "Poor Boy Blues," included on the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Poor Boy leaves his home in Louisiana where he could do as he pleased, finds himself in Texas where he must work or leave, and mysteriously ends up on a boat that comes "rockin' just like a drunken man," resigning himself to identify his home on the water because he "sure don't like the land" (Track 71). Sounding like Ulysses who found his way onto Rimbaud's drunken boat, Thomas' Poor Boy seems detached in the pain of exile and uncanniness of his existence. Something happened back in Louisiana to unsettle his home, his ability to do as he pleases. Maybe he had a run-in with the law. And perhaps something happened in Texas too, leaving him the only option to remain afloat, never to touch land again, deftly symbolizing a complete inability to settle:

Poor Boy

Poor Boy

Poor Boy long ways from home. (Track 71)

A performance like this is not a call for sympathy, though we might give it just as the American popular imagination has displayed sympathy for an outlaw like Jesse James. Rather, it's a moment when the voice of those who won't settle, are left unsettled, excluded, uprooted, dispossessed, or merely left behind as anachronisms in the process of constructing the American Dream makes its presence known, notwithstanding



possible culpability for an illegal act. It's not compelling because of sympathy. It's compelling because of its uncanny, almost cathartic force. It's not sympathy for the outlaw that keeps the outlaw figure alive in the popular imagination. Rather it's the force of the outlaw's existence somewhere out there, somewhere that's not "home," and the creative and disruptive possibility it presents in cultural performance. As the frontier or Wild West became a part of American history and tradition rather than a physical fact and forward-looking idea bolstered by the romantic imagination, the outlaw and his appeal were no longer apart from the civilization he stood dialectically opposed to; he was much closer to home. The entirely externalized dialectic of the civilized and savage became an internal dialectic that's not so easy to repudiate: the normal, settled existence and the uncanny, unsettled undercurrent of everyday life.

Rather than considering the outlaw element as a part of folk tradition in the sense that it's merely a category, this chapter argues that, in a cultural sense, the folk tradition is an outlaw tradition. Even though it serves as a foundation for national character and spirit, folk tradition exists as an uncanny undercurrent of American mainstream society. The cultural force of folk performance results from its outlaw status. As Robert Cantwell argues, "The power and authority of folklore consist precisely in the fact that, because it arises where power has lapsed, retreated, or failed, it lies outside all authority and power" (*Ethnomimesis* 214). Folklore as cultural performance makes it possible to negotiate the gap between the outlaw, outcast, or a way of life that might be considered primitive and modern mainstream mass culture, or genteel high-brow culture, or some other construction of a standard by which performance is judged to be worthwhile,

valued, good, or true. Thus we have the strange tension of a national tradition based upon what, historically, it has partially repudiated and/or left behind; a settled nation that embraces, yet distinguishes itself from, the outlaw territory it has never quite settled.

Folk song collections or anthologies map and give voice to the American outlaw territory. Some have been framed more overtly as popular entertainment than others, especially beginning in 1910 with Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and other Frontier Ballads*. Prior to Lomax's book, song collections primarily had academic or curatorial aims to preserve folk songs and ballads in a scholarly manner as a historical testament to what has been lost or exists primarily in the past. The outlaw quality of these collections and the constructed American folk tradition they represent exists in tension with the impulse to present a record of an authentic American (rather than European-derived) folk tradition, the spirit of American character, which had been generally dismissed prior to 1910. Thus, in addition to being a record of outlaw cultural and social performance, the collections themselves marked outlaw territory. They disrupted early views of what constituted true folklore in an effort to establish a new foundation for an American folk narrative distinct from European folk traditions. And yet, as the idea of an authentic American folk culture became more accepted, some expressed discomfort with the source of this authentic American voice.

In 1915, John Lomax classified the types of folk songs he'd collected, the majority of which revolved around specific lower-class occupations: the miners, lumbermen, sailors, soldiers, railroad workers, and cowboys. These voices were perhaps less objectionable as a source for the American folk voice than the other types he lists:

“the ballads of the negro” and “songs of the down-and-out classes, — the outcast girl, the dope fiend, the convict, the jail-bird, and the tramp” (“Some Types” 3). John and Alan Lomax’s 1935 collection, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, categorizes the songs in a similar manner—by the persona of the performer or author and possibly the presumed audience. In a generally positive review of the collection, Carl Engel complains that the book “gives one at first the impression that America depends for its folk-song literature chiefly on ‘Niggah’ convicts and white ‘bums.’ This impression is not altogether pleasant” (108-9). Engel further shows his discomfort with this idea: “we are not entirely convinced that the Spirit of America, when it blossoms forth—as that of other nations flowers in the treasures of epic and lyric folk-poetry—necessarily finds its truest and most telling expression in the songs of black ‘boys’ who have exchanged their identity for a number” (109). In other words, this is, to say the least, an unsettling thought for some that might be written off as merely a result of the Lomaxes’ collecting preferences. The outlaw voices persist, however, making their uncanny existence as integral to the “Spirit of America” known.

If outlaw voices are the ones primarily found in American folk song collections, voices that tell of their outlaw existence, sometimes reveling in it, sometimes despairing, or sometimes simply living with it, then the constructed patterning of these voices in anthology form are maps of the outlaw territory they occupy: the old, weird America. Technically, Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs*, Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*, and Carl Sandburg’s *American Songbag*, the collections discussed this chapter, do not claim to be anthologies (originally, Smith’s collection was entitled *American Folk*

*Music*). Yet, they're all anthological in their construction and intent to provide a collective representation of the American folk voice. These anthologies demonstrate three distinct impulses: 1) to present and preserve a vanishing cultural voice, 2) to celebrate and encourage the performative aspect of folk culture as American identity, thereby keeping this culture and tradition alive and open to everyone, and 3) to serve as a representative cross section of an American pattern of experience. These impulses exist in all three collections discussed in this chapter, but each one has a different point of emphasis: Lomax on the first, Sandburg on the second, and Smith on the third.

Together, these collections accomplish that which Engel was wary of: presenting the less ideal, repudiated, and uncanny vision of the blossoming "Spirit of America." Engel's characterization of the American spirit as flowers blossoming from the land actually corresponds to the earliest meanings of "anthology." In early Greek, an anthology was a collection of flowers, thus chthonic, earthy. In later Greek, a homonym of anthology developed, referring to a hymnal. Hence, the earthy and the spiritual are tied together in "anthology," making it a fitting description for these collections which are explicitly or implicitly framed as culling the spirit of the nation from the land. Like the outcast and outlaw voices collected within the anthological framework (just as the flowers gathered in the original sense are no longer rooted), the anthology form itself is rootless, blurs borders and frames the American voice in a liminal space from which cultural performance arises.

Before examining Lomax's, Sandburg's, and Smith's anthologies, however, we'll first take a journey into the outlaw territory of the old, weird America to better

understand the American space from which they arise, the nowhere from which the unsettling disturbs the ideal as it did for Engel. One can only imagine his reaction if he'd read the lyrics to "Big Rock Candy Mountain." A utopian nowhere characterized as a bum's paradise in the 1920s and transformed into a children's song by the 1940s, the original 1890s version was a tale of a "jocker" (an older bum) attempting to lure a teenage boy into being his "punk" with what bums called "ghost stories" of whiskey streams, lemonade springs, and such. One can also only imagine how parents who sang this song with their children, perhaps before bed, might react if they heard the original lyrics and Harry McClintock's explanation: "[T]he ambition of every real hobo was to snare some kid to do his beggin' for him among other things," "other things" sometimes including sexual favors (qtd. in Rammel 26)—unsettling to say the least and a perfect example of how the old, weird America can disrupt the "normal" home.

### Greetings from the Old, Weird America

On September 24, 1891, the *Badger State Banner* reported: "Poverty and no work caused August Schultz of Appleton to shoot himself in the head while sitting in his little home with his wife and 5 children" (Lesy 9/24/91).<sup>24</sup> If Mr. Schultz couldn't foresee a positive turn in his fortune, his despair would prove well-founded. By 1893,

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* was published without page numbers. For citation purposes the date of the news stories will be given.

when America's first great depression began, crippling the economy for approximately four years, national unemployment rates nearly doubled from 4.77 in 1891 to 8.09 in 1893 and increased further to 12.33 the next year (Romer 31). Nearly seventy years later, Bob Dylan dramatized a similar incident occurring on a North Dakota farm during an unspecified time with an even more tragic ending in "Ballad of Hollis Brown." In addition to taking his own life in the face of economic despair, Hollis Brown takes his wife and five children with him rather than leave them to face the maddening hunger and disease that plagues their bodies, land, and livestock. In the factual incident from Wisconsin and Dylan's fictional tale we're given unsettling accounts of the ideal American homestead gone awry. The stories involve the settlers that form a central element of American mythology, but instead of the promise of a settled home, there's only the claustrophobic, inescapable failure and burden of home: the *Banner*'s use of the phrase "little home" has none of the quaintness it might have in a "normal" context. Home becomes a nightmare, something to be shed of by any means possible.

August Schultz's unsettling little home and Hollis Brown's claustrophobic domestic nightmare might seem like abnormalities or simply a gothic twist on the American Dream; but beneath, on the margins, in the basement or attic of the Dream and other national myths is the old, weird America, an uncanny doppelganger of founding myths and the different forms these myths as national ideals and traditions have taken throughout history. Greil Marcus invented the term "old, weird America" to describe the American folk culture of Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, but the notion of a territorial "shadow America" goes beyond simply describing the milieu of

Smith's collection (Marcus, *Mystery Train* 31). For Marcus, the old, weird America "goes back to the Puritans. It has to do with raising certain goals for the founders of a new land . . . that they are to live up to a holy mission and if they fail that they will have to suffer a punishment commensurate with their sin. That's a weird premise on which to found a country and yet that is the premise on which this country continues to understand itself" (qtd. in Murphy). What's weird about this premise is not that American society and culture can be simplified to a question of whether a person (or even the nation) is a success or failure deserving of reward or punishment. Rather, it's weird because there's an implicit notion that a person has adhered to or deviated from a constructed "law" that's inexorably tied to fate or destiny (chance and possibility are therefore not even recognized). It's the train bound for glory and/or nowhere.

In *Mystery Train* (1975), two decades before Marcus coined the phrase *old, weird America*, he placed Robert Johnson's body of work and legend in the same context. The strong presence of the devil in his music and story is ripe for this type of juxtaposition. For the Puritans, Marcus argues, the "idea was to do God's work, and they knew that if they failed, it would mean that their work had been the devil's" (*Mystery Train* 31). Quite the opposite, Johnson's mythical deal with the devil and the talents that came from this commerce certainly haven't been popularly characterized as a result of failure despite what, in Marcus' reading based on something like the Faust legend, Johnson's work might express about the overwhelming tension of good and evil forces hounding a man to death. And even though we might feel this kind of tension in his performance, there's also Johnson's outlaw persona, not only resigned to his fate but

taking it head-on like badman Stagolee or John Henry. Within this Puritan context, Marcus makes Johnson's small body of work seem like a concise epic of American character swimming in a sea of ambivalence with its ebb of terror and flow of pleasure and beauty, but this context may have more to do with Marcus' identity as an American studies scholar than with Johnson's status as a perennial favorite among blues performers and fans. Today, it reads a little like cliché compared to his most original insights on the old, weird America. National mythology, as much as it goes back to the Puritans and their holy mission, also goes back to the economic venture of Jamestown settlement, the mysterious Lost Colony of Roanoke, the Native American nations, tribes and bands, and even back to Africa and the Middle Passage. Before the New World became the Old America, it was "weird" from the beginning. It is doubtful Robert Johnson ever gave a thought to Puritans and their sense of a holy mission while singing of hellhounds on his trail. Mississippi during the 1920s and 30s, with its old, weird social and economic structure that was simply a shadow of antebellum slavery, was as far back as someone like Johnson would have to go to understand these qualities. Marcus's main contribution is a sense of a shadow America existing as a result of a covenant or mythologized historical narrative so ideal, so innocent, it was doomed to fail and in that failure, the tension between a belief that the ideal was a real thing, a possibility, and the reality of life, of society, of citizenship, that plays out the terror and beauty of an American social drama and ritual. In this sense, the shadow America is the reality of life unmasked.



In canonical American literature, this moment of unmasking is dramatized in Robert Penn Warren's short story "Blackberry Winter." Almost biblically signaled by massive rainfall and flood, the herald of this new worldview for the young narrator Seth is a dark, mysterious tramp whose ragged city clothes seem out of place—the glitter of a large knife in his pocket warning of devilment and lost innocence—and who emerges from the woods behind Seth's family property. On this morning, nothing Seth holds constant in his innocent view of the world remains true. To start, his mother tells him he can't go out barefoot. "But it's June," he argues as if it's a natural fact that June signals a time when one can always go barefoot (Warren 64). "It's June," she agrees, "but it's blackberry winter" (64). As if on cue, the tramp appears on the tree line triggering a series of glimpses of a less than Edenic life. For instance, there's drowned chicks in the yard and down the road, Milt Alley's dead, bloated cow violently bobbing in the flood waters prompts another young boy to wonder if anyone ever saw times bad enough to make a meal of a drowned cow. An old man nearby is the only one bold enough in the crowd watching the floodwaters roar to answer, saying what all the adults know too well, "Live long enough . . . and a man will settle for what he kin get" (77). The liminal space of Seth's initiation into a fallen world then culminates with the mysterious tramp brandishing his knife and threatening, "You don't stop following me and I cut yore throat, you little son-of-a-bitch" (86). By then, he has no choice but to follow, with eyes open.

The old, weird America is the social drama of broken promises, the resonance of betrayal, exclusion, and failure of the Dream. Law and tradition dictate the ideal

behaviors and boundaries of the Dream. Living outside the law in the old, weird America challenges the Dream to make good on its promises, knowing full well it can't. Eating a drowned cow is unthinkable, but it doesn't mean that it doesn't happen. If "Blackberry Winter" demonstrates an initiation into the old, weird America, it's only an example that helps to understand rather than define Marcus' notion. Defining the old, weird America isn't easy, if possible at all, and it seems to exist as a sense, a feeling, something one can understand without being able to define it. It conjures similes, metaphors, images, examples from history, literature, and music. It's the mysterious tramp, disheveled, homeless, brandishing a knife, and disrupting the ideal home and childhood innocence. It's the terrifying vision of John Brown in John S. Curry's painting for the Kansas State Capitol. It's the devil knocking on Robert Johnson's door one morning in "Me and the Devil Blues." It's the ghosts of the many dead in the process of settling the West with the aid of the Winchester repeating rifle that Sarah Winchester was compelled to appease (to keep from knocking on her door) by unceasing construction of the mysterious and mammoth Winchester house in California. In one sense, the old, weird America is accepted heritage and tradition (and the nostalgia fed by their idealistic renderings) critically inverted to the point where tradition and social and cultural ritual serve as the foil to represent everything that's wrong with it. At times, it can play out in social ritual and drama like Mardi Gras celebrations, set outside and seen as abnormal, but contained by the ritual tradition and therefore made acceptable. At other times, it comes unexpectedly like something as dramatic as a shotgun blast cutting through the silence, a mysterious tramp brandishing a knife, or perhaps something as

seemingly mundane as a foul smell wafting from the home of a Southern gentlewoman as depicted in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

In Faulkner's tale Miss Emily Grierson is introduced by the collective town narrator as an anachronistic remnant of the Old South tradition. Yet, even when seen as an outsider to modern Southern life, the tradition she's perceived as representative of by the townspeople still commands a certain influence: Emily was a "hereditary obligation upon the town," explains the collective narrator (433). Locked away in her antiquated home, a stifling representative of a tradition that lingers as an obligation rather than belief, however, Emily is not so much a representative of the Old South myth, but an outcast from it and the people and society that help to enforce it. In a way, Emily's existence resides somewhere between a mythic home and public speculation. Her refusal to pay taxes, her disregard of the effects of the strange smell that emanates from her home just after her Yankee suitor, Homer Baron, disappeared, and her refusal to tell the druggist why she needed arsenic: all of these dismissals of laws and conventions demonstrate how she's able to disrupt "normal" life from this liminal space with the authority of an outmoded and failed tradition. Because of the town's "hereditary obligation" these disruptions are overlooked; the old, weird America is hidden by a mask of tradition. By the end of the tale, the reconstruction of incidents reveal the old, weird America in full view as we learn that the arsenic was purchased to poison Homer Baron, and the notorious smell coming from Emily's home was his decaying body locked away in an upstairs bedroom. The room inhabited by the desiccated body of Homer Baron is itself the symbolic rose for Emily with its faded rose valence curtains and "rose-shaded

lights” (443). Faulkner leaves us with an improvisation on one of the oldest-known folk ballads, “Barbara Allen,” with its closing image of a rose and briar intertwined over the graves of Barbara Allen and William, the man she rebuked and left to die broken-hearted: a strand of Emily’s iron-gray hair on the pillow next to Baron’s fleshless corpse lying in an attitude of embrace.

The unsettled home and the grotesquery of tradition as something unchanging rather than alive and versatile are constant themes in Faulkner’s work. It drives Quentin Compson to suicide over the course of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* In the latter work, we see Thomas Sutpen as the embodiment of an Ahab-esque pursuit of everything American mythic traditions promise, including success in home and family and most importantly the American individualist freedom to establish one’s place in society. But again, these are just examples of what the phrase “old, weird America” suggests. In Faulkner’s case, it’s tied to the myth of the Old South in a similar way that Marcus puts it in the Puritan context. In both contexts we see a constant theme of promise and betrayal of that promise, the unavoidable tension of idealism and static tradition doomed to failure.

A similar tension is at the center of Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, clearly outlined in the opening tale of an old writer dreaming of a parade of “grotesques” who inspire him to write their stories. The central idea of the old writer’s book is that in the beginning the world was full of truths and people came along and claimed one or more truth as their own, which eventually corrupted both the truth (making it a falsehood) and the person. The Midwestern town of Winesburg is full of these

grotesques, and what's clear in the majority of their stories is that an inability to make a human connection because of an irrational devotion to their truth is what makes them outcast. And yet, the predicament of these grotesques implicitly critiques the status quo façade of the community. In fact, the entire town seems to be locked away in their individual truths with the young George Willard, a reporter for the local newspaper, as their only human contact. Of course, their stories never make the newspaper. They remain buried under general news of weather, comings and goings of townspeople, the status quo. Like Edgar Lee Masters' scrutiny of small town America, *Spoon River Anthology*, published just four years before *Winesburg, Ohio*, the unsettling truths remain communally buried in a sort of anthology or community archive collected, catalogued, and forgotten until they're finally allowed to speak in death or some frantic urge to be heard. What's unsettling, however, is that these fictional models of small town America weren't merely fantasy. They were reflections of historic lives of people and towns throughout the country.

Almost stranger than fiction and more unsettling, Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973) demonstrates the reality of the fictional stories of the old, weird America disrupting everyday life. Lesy's anthological collage of archival photographs and text presents an uncanny and nightmarish view of Midwestern, rural life in and around Black River Falls, Wisconsin at the close of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Wisconsin

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<sup>25</sup> The photos were taken by Black River Falls commercial photographer Charley Van Schaick between 1890 and 1910 while the text comes from five types of sources: the *Badger State Banner* (all written or edited by Frank Cooper and his son between 1890 and 1910), the records of the state insane asylum (Mendota State Hospital), passages from Midwestern novelists (such as Hamlin Garland, Glenway

(which officially became a state in 1848) appears anything but settled with the narrative's relentless focus on suicides, murders, economic disparity during the first great depression, tramp armies overrunning towns, widespread acts of arson, rampant insanity and disease, curious tales of clairvoyants and ghosts appearing, railroad accidents, and many other unsettling stories (interspersed with an occasional glimmer of normalcy) which is punctuated by photographic sections that visually complement the strange and disturbing stories. August Schultz's suicide was just one of many that occurred in the face of economic despair. Many took their own lives because of unrequited love. Others left no trace of reason, like Christ Wold, whose witnessed final words were, "Here I go and the Lord go with me," just before he placed his head above a hole filled with dynamite and lit the fuse (8/17/99). Or Henry Johnson ("an old bachelor") who cut off the heads of all his chickens, set all of his clothes on fire, and poisoned himself with arsenic (4/3/90). One story that surfaces a number of times in the *Badger State Banner* during the 1890s is that of Mary Sweeny, a serial window smasher, but once "a model wife and mother" (10/6/92). Perhaps, at first encounter, Sweeny's hobby is more strangely charming than unsettling, especially amidst the suicides, murders, and poverty. Yet, her transgressive act of smashing hundreds of windows throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin suggests a feeling of powerlessness and the stifling atmosphere of the settled home, making the act seem like a sign of pandemic failures of the American myth of the settled home at the turn of the century.

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Wescott and Edgar Lee Masters) and two "mythical creatures," a "local historian" and "town gossip" (Lesy "Introduction").

Looking back it appears that some strange madness seized the Midwest at the turn of the century when, in fact, these incidents were reported in a way that makes them seem almost status quo. Murders, suicides, and other unsettling tales were reported as simply a matter of fact like any other news, such as that of Alexander Gardapie's natural death at the age of ninety: "He walked into a saloon, drank a glass of gin, asked the time of day, sat down, and died" (1/31/95). As Lesy argues, in the space of approximately seventy years, between the time that the events actually happened and the reexamination of them as archival material, the incidents "changed from the most ordinary records of the most ordinary events into arcane remnants, obscure relics, antique mementos" ("Introduction"). Aside from the implicit subjectivity of Lesy's assessment, it's hard to imagine that these tales could ever be perceived as ordinary. If these records and events were ordinary by the day's standard, we must wonder what effect this nightmarish normalcy had if it didn't unsettle the everyday. Lesy attempts to explain the effect of these newspaper reports as something like catharsis: "These accounts turned grief inside out; they turned murderous sorrow outward toward the eyes of a crowd that could not only comfort it, but, by participating in it, could be immunized against it" (Lesy "Introduction"). The grief, violence, and strangeness of everyday life become status quo in this cathartic exercise, hidden within this turn-of-the-century society and culture. Experiencing these accounts today is disruptive and perhaps attunes us to the contemporary shadow America.

Much of the force of the old, weird America is to disrupt the status quo, providing a space for counter-myths to challenge dominant myths. It's the liveliness of

folklore underlying historical narratives. In 2008, an exhibition curated by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston entitled, *The Old, Weird America: Folk Themes in Contemporary Art*, was arranged to demonstrate a resurgence of this liveliness in recent art with works included that “recklessly combine myth and fact to suggest an alternative national history” (Kamps 15). David Rathman’s existential silhouetted cowboys and outlaws captioned with thoughts like “Guilty as hell! Free as a bird!” or “My vices were magnificent” capture the ambivalent nature of the outlaw in American history and popular culture. Jeremy Blake’s video, *Winchester*, dramatizes the psychological weight and baggage of the national expansion West with the aid of the Winchester rifle attached to the unsettled home of Sarah Winchester. Eric Beltz provides alternate historical myths in his sketches of America’s founding fathers by improvising on the accepted myths and juxtaposing Tibetan and Egyptian elements along with witchcraft and herbal medicine. There’s Washington sitting on a log with an ax and pointing at the stump in *Fuck You Tree* (2007), Jefferson smoking a pipe next to a woodpile outside his second home, Poplar Forest, where he spent a good amount of time after his presidency in *Good Luck Assholes* (2007), and Franklin cross-legged by a campfire in an improvisation of Goya’s *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* in *Breath of Satan* (2007).

The lesson the alternative national history constructed from these works and the rest in the exhibition presents, senior curator Toby Kamps explains, “is that you have merely to scratch the surface of the culture to discover layers of maddening, magical complexity and contradiction. . . . the artists in this exhibition bring [folklife’s] anarchic energy—and potential for social change, adventure, and revelation—vividly to life” (24).



Four years after the premier of the Houston exhibit, the Whitney Museum of American Art implied a similar reading of the old, weird America vision of the folk as an anarchic energy, naming its 2012 biennial exhibition *From the Old, Weird America to Occupy Wall Street*. Of course, looking back to the early folk art movement that went hand in hand with the modernist movement in all forms of art, this disruptive energy and force has been well understood from the very beginnings of the establishment of an American folk culture in respect to popular, mainstream culture.

With all these examples from literature, history, visual art, and music, are we any closer to defining the old, weird America? How can we define the shadow, the uncanny, the nowhere on the other side of glory without interaction with the normal, status quo, dominant historical narratives, myths, and traditions? The tricky part is that the former is subsumed, a part of while also apart from the latter. The milieu of the old, weird America sheds light on this tension most resonantly in artistic and cultural performances because even if it can't be defined, it can be acted out in some way, experienced as performance. Faulkner's Emily Grierson and Thomas Sutpen: the full implication of their stories is only made possible through a community of narrators. The same is the case with Anderson's town of Winesburg, Masters's Spoon River, and their historical sister city of Black River Falls. In a way they're all anthologic collages of stories and images that give voice to what is often characterized as the folk voice of America. How that folk voice is received by the general public is another matter, but it always bears out the tension between betrayed promises, repudiated heritage, and the impossibility of the Dream, providing a space for cultural change in the guise of tradition.

In the end, the old, weird America isn't about Puritans, the South, the West, the Midwest, etc. It's about the performative articulation of a sense that normal, mainstream life is greatly flawed and that without this recognition, change is never possible, individuals cannot have a voice. And precisely because it's a performative articulation it requires an audience to receive the act in order for it to be understood and can therefore not be defined other than by recognizing certain themes such as tradition, nostalgia, violence, the individual impulse against the collective and the collective impulse against the individual, the felt tension of arrested freedom like Faulkner's arrested moments that hang stillness and act in frozen balance, leaving them unclassifiable, but understood in their potential. It's out of this arrested tension that the following anthologies of folk music arose and left their mark on popular culture.

#### Remembrance of Things American: The Voice of the Frontier

In the summer of 1910, Theodore Roosevelt, during his attendance at the Frontier Celebration in Cheyenne, Wyoming, wrote a statement of support praising John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, for its preservation of native ballads, which "[u]nder modern conditions . . . [are] speedily killed by competition with the music hall songs" (qtd. *Cowboy Songs* [1910] vii). Essentially, Roosevelt is speaking of the "civilizing" of American culture and expression that was displacing the country's "crude homegrown ballads" of frontier, or folk, cultural traditions, making the collection

“a work of real importance to preserve permanently this unwritten ballad literature of the back country and the frontier” (vii, viii). Six years later Roosevelt would give a speech at the National Institute of Arts and Letters where he insisted that “American work must smack of our own soil, mental and moral, no less than physical, or it will have little of permanent value” (qtd. in Bronner 3). The subject matter of Roosevelt’s speech represented America’s turn-of-the-century struggle to define the true American identity, a reinvigoration of the transcendental concerns of Emerson and Whitman which called for a “native” American voice in scholarship and poetry and emphasis upon the performative importance of the American scholar and poet as representative of the democratic collective. In one sense, western expansion came to represent American identity, but it didn’t *express* it. Looking back, perhaps more than anything, the perceived loss of a frontier life and culture by the end of the century became even more integral to forming an American cultural identity than the physical fact of the frontier. In his introduction to *Cowboy Songs*, John Lomax concisely summarizes the symbolic loss: “The big ranches of the West are now being cut up into small farms. . . . Gone are the buffalo, the Indian warwhoop, the free grass of the open plain” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xxii). Of course, there’s a lot more to the story of the West, but as we see here, even in 1910, twenty years after the official end of the frontier, the hallmark representative symbols and issues that made up the popular and culturally dominant narrative of the West had already formed to the point of archetypes.

John A. Lomax grew up on the Texas frontier; a fact sometimes forgotten in the shadow of the name he made for himself in the 1930s with his field recordings,

appointment as Honorary Consultant and Curator of the Archive of American Folk Song for the Library of Congress, and discovery of Lead Belly. His family moved from Mississippi to Bosque County, Texas in 1869, when Lomax was two years old. The Lomaxes weren't exactly pioneers, but they made their way west like so many pioneering folk before them, following a wagon train across the Mississippi River. In the wake of the Civil War, their cultural and social experience living in the South was markedly different from that of the pioneers of the early nineteenth century, evident in the first sentence of the opening chapter of Lomax's autobiography: "My family belonged to the upper crust of the 'po' white trash,' traditionally held in contempt by the aristocracy of the Old South and by their Negro slaves" (*Adventures* 1). In this context, Lomax's frontier was less about settling the country and more about unifying and giving it voice through a romanticized vision of itself.

This is not to say that Lomax sought to eradicate the social structure of the post-Civil War South by denouncing racism or even the old myths. In fact, John's son, Alan, was constantly frustrated by his father's paternalistic racism. Rather, John Lomax's chief aim, fueled by his "frontier" experience growing up, was to record and preserve a quintessential, but vanishing American voice: the voice of the frontier and the cowboy. The relics of voice that he collected demonstrated that it was well aware of its own passing, as evident in "The Camp Fire Has Gone Out," a meditation on the vanishing cowboy precipitated by the railroad and the homesteaders brought with it:

Through progress of the railroads our occupations gone;  
So we will put ideas into words, our words into a song.

First comes the cowboy, he is pointed for the west;  
Of all the pioneers I claim the cowboys are the best;  
You will miss him on the round-up, it's gone, his merry shout,—

The cowboy has left the country and the campfire has gone out. (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] 322).

Growing up in Bosque County, his home “beside a branch of the old Chisholm Trail,” Lomax recalls, “I couldn’t have been more than four years old when I first heard a cowboy sing and yodel to his cattle” (*Adventures* 19). Lomax remembers the precise moment the voice of the frontier struck him, making it sound, nearly eighty years later, like a romantic epic. It was nighttime, and young John was awakened by the sound of a cowboy singing: “A slow rain fell in the darkness outside . . . and my heart leapt even then to the cries of the cowboy trying to quiet, in the deep darkness and sifting rain, a trail herd of restless cattle” (*Adventures* 19). The song he includes as a suggestion of what he might have heard is a lonely night-herding take on “Git along, Little Dogies”:

O, slow up, dogies, quit your roving around,  
You have wandered and tramped all over the ground;  
O graze along, dogies, and feed kinda slow,  
And don’t forever be on the go—  
O move slow, dogies, move slow. (*Adventures* 19)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This particular version of “Git along, Little Dogies” appears in *Cowboys Songs and other Frontier Ballads* (1910) as “Night-Herding Song,” attributed to Harry Stephens. A 1946 Library of Congress recording of Stephens singing the song is accompanied by a dialogue between Lomax and Stephens wherein Lomax mentions that Stephens had sent him the lyrics to the songs many years before. Thus, Lomax probably didn’t hear this particular song on the fateful night he remembered, and this suggests that

Lomax's remembrance of this moment could be the opening of a film starring Roy Rogers, whose movie career was cresting at the time Lomax's autobiography was published (1947). But the singing cowboy role made famous by Rogers, Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, and others in B-Western movies was a much more polished version of the cowboys Lomax was so entranced by as a child, though Lomax's romantic fascination with the cowboy was no less idealized than the popular reception of these singing cowboys on film.

Lomax's cowboy, portrayed in his collection, demonstrates an ambiguity in this idealization, a tension between the romantic conception of a rowdy, rootless, rugged individualists and civilized, settled society. Growing up alongside the Chisholm Trail, Lomax's boyhood idealization of the cowboy was mixed with the reality of the cowboy occupation and frontier life, with the Chisholm Trail standing as the main thoroughfare for this particular social and cultural drama that Lomax saw vanishing. A long cattle trail that cut from the Red River area of Texas to Dodge City, Kansas, the Chisholm Trail itself was a culturally liminal space, traveled by those who were generally outsiders to settled life, and the trail became more conspicuously "weird" as frontier life vanished and the trail gradually became the Old Chisholm Trail.

The eponymous song dramatizing life on the Old Chisholm Trail is a collection of floating verses endlessly improvised upon by individuals, accentuating the trail as

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Lomax was re-crafting his romantic memories of his childhood. It certainly seems no coincidence that Lomax's memory of hearing a cowboy sing this song as a boy was published in his autobiography only a year after the recording.

symbolic performative space: part ritual, part chronicle, and part boast of cowboy prowess and debauchery, held together by the cowboy yodel refrain “Coma ti yi youpy, youpy yea, youpy yea, / Coma ti yi youpy, youpy yea” (or some similar sounding improvisation on the yodel) (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] 58). As Lomax notes in the 1938 edition of *Cowboy Songs*, “This song in its entirety would give all the possible experiences of a group of cowboys driving a herd of cattle from Texas to Dodge City, Kansas” (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 28).<sup>27</sup> The range of subject matter treated in the many verses makes it possible to see the song as an overture to Lomax’s entire collection. It’s a living and anthologic song, held together by the fluid boundaries of the famous cattle trail and the wandering cowboy occupation. In some ways “The Old Chisholm Trail” can be seen as a cowboy version of the Stagolee ballad because it’s an endlessly improvised upon narrative of a cultural archetype, especially when considering the cowboy equivalent of boasting of his “badness.” But with all the cowboy’s boasts of being the “best damned cowboy ever was born,” it seems he’s more frequently on the losing end, suggesting a wry humor in this boast, as if to be the best cowboy is merely to be able to endure a number of hardships and setbacks (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] 60). He endures to a point, however, suggested by the many versions which find the cowboy giving up the occupation to marry and settle down to a domestic town life.

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<sup>27</sup> Lomax’s presentation of the song in the collection is only part of the story. Many stanzas are not included because, as he notes in the 1938 edition, they were “not mailable” i.e. too crude to pass mail obscenity laws.

With such a range of possibilities occurring in the space of the Old Chisholm Trail the continual tension between life on the trail and settled life plays out the social drama of an outlaw figure negotiating his cultural existence. Two songs that appear next to each other in *Cowboy Songs*, “The Cowboy’s Life” and “The Kansas Line,” juxtapose this tension clearly. In the first, the cowboy revels in his “royal life”:

For a kingly crown

In the noisy town

His saddle he wouldn’t change;

No life so free

As the life we see

Way out on the Yaso range. (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] 20)

But this revelry sounds like romantic vibrato next to “The Kansas Line” with its presumably more honest and realistic refrain, “the cowboy’s life is a dreadful life,” and its advice to marry and “[n]ever to roam, always stay at home” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] 22). In between this revelry of cowboy life and the renouncing of it for a domestic life are a number of other possibilities. It could end bloody, as countless songs in the collection suggest, particularly “Trail End”:

There was blood on the saddle,

And blood all around,

And a great, big puddle

Of blood on the ground. (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 288)



Or it could be an unbearably lonely existence, as we see in “Poor Lonesome Cowboy,” with a cowboy who finds himself a long ways from home with no father, mother, sister, brother, or sweetheart to help stay his lonesomeness. The cowboy’s got the blues, the musical direction (in the 1938 edition) to sing “with proper melancholy,” suggesting that anyone interested in singing the song knows just what degree of deep, lonesome melancholy is “proper” (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 290-91). In 1936, Lomax recorded Lead Belly singing a similar sentiment about the cowboy/outlaw life in his version of “The Old Chisholm Trail” but with “rude vigor”: “I’m a po’ western cowboy, great long ways from home” (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 39, 40). Lead Belly’s version mixes frontier lonesomeness with country blues, transforming the song from a chronicle of the cowboy life and culture to a more explicit cultural association with an outlaw like Jesse James:

Wo, de hardes’ battle was ever on de western plains,

When me an’ a bunch o’ cowboys run into Jesse James.

Coma ti yi yippy, ti yi yippy, yippy yea. (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] 41).

The cowboy, in many of the songs Lomax collected, sees himself as an outlaw, an outcast from society, such as in “The Cowboy,” where the cowboy meditates on the natural spirituality of his life and critiques the judgment of a “society [that] bans [him] so savage and dodge” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] 97). Lomax’s reading of the cowboy figure in American culture attempts to negotiate this outlaw existence, making it acceptable as an integral part of society while also preserving its distinction as a unique exemplar of the qualities necessary for the establishment of a civilized society. Lomax treats the unifying subject of his collection as a frontier agent of civilization who “has

always been on the skirmish line of civilization. Restless, fearless, chivalric, elemental, he lived hard, shot quick and true, and died with his face to the foe” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xxii). Essentially, he characterizes the cowboy as an outlaw on the right side of the law, a just force of good against obstacles to American manifest destiny. It’s telling, then, that in his brief comment on Lomax’s collection, Roosevelt, author of the four volume *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896), highlighted the tale of an outlaw as a particular trait of America’s native identity: “There is something very curious in the reproduction here on this new continent of essentially the conditions of ballad-growth which obtained in medieval England; including, by the way, sympathy for the outlaw, Jesse James taking the place of Robin Hood” (qtd. in Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* [1910] vii). This comment suggests that even though the James ballad was noteworthy out of the “crude homegrown ballads,” it still bore the mark of English tradition. In this context we need to pause a minute to note how Lomax’s anthology was just as much of an “outlaw” as its subject.

John Lomax was putting down stakes in the new frontier of American folk song at the same time he was revisiting a romanticized memory of the physical frontier. At the time of publication, Lomax’s collection was very much a deviation from the conventional academic view of what constituted true folk ballads, especially because many, at the time, would argue that America had no folk ballads of its own. He sought to justify the validity of the collection, however, by giving the ballads the cultural weight of the English and Scottish ballad tradition that predominated in folklore studies, most notably nineteenth-century American folklorist Francis James Child’s work. Lomax

even includes some obvious ballads of Anglo-Saxon origin in his collection, such as a song that references an English outlaw, Dick Turpin, in “Bonnie Black Bess” and another concerning Australian outlaws in “Jack Donahoo.” In the “Collector’s Note” to *Cowboy Songs* Lomax emphasizes the survival of this cultural heredity, “[o]ut in the wild, far-away places of the big and still unpeopled West” where the “Anglo-Saxon ballad spirit that was active in secluded districts in England and Scotland” still exists, and reveals itself both in the preservation of the English ballad and in the creation of local songs” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xvii). While it’s true that folk song collections at this time were beginning to recognize a tradition of folk song in America, the contemporary collections focused on the residue of English, Scottish, and Irish ballad tradition in America, particularly the Appalachian region, not the creation of “local songs.”

Lomax’s justification of the existence of an American folk tradition through connection to older traditions, however, was not simply a rhetorical move to try to convince academic folklorists of the importance of his work. Many traditional folklorists, academics, and even the governor of Texas actually derided the work at the time of its publication. In many ways it participated in the frontier rhetoric that was discussed in the last chapter, particularly in the Turnerian dialectic of savagery and civilization. Lomax’s collection represents the perception of American progress as romantic epic in the vein of Sir Walter Scott, suggesting even more ancient roots by also referencing Homeric epic in his preface. In this way, American progress symbolically becomes not only a manifest destiny for Americans, but civilization’s continual push

West from Greece to Europe and finally to America. The ballad spirit that traveled across the Atlantic to the wild, “unpeopled West” would continue the tradition, but in a “local” way. It manifested an individual—the American—folk voice. Notably, this is not a “civilized” voice, but one that came from the marginal space of the frontier. The ballads sprung from “[i]lliterate people, and people cut off from newspapers and books, isolated and lonely folk” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xvii). The cowboy songs and frontier ballads expressed the experience of these people, representing “the operation of instinct and tradition” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xvii). Lomax differentiates individual folk expression (the creation of it) from the greater epic tradition by referring to it as instinct. In this framing, the savage, or primal, creates out of instinct. It occurs naturally, springing from the work and harsh conditions of the frontier Lomax witnessed as a boy living on the Old Chisholm Trail. The instinctual growth of song from local circumstance is a performative, improvisational act by “the folk” not yet structured by the laws or education of civilization.

Yet, however instinctual the creation of an American folk voice may have appeared to Lomax, it’s still constructed by the national myth of manifest destiny—even if the introduction demonstrates his romantic conservatism in a slightly mournful tone for the approaching disappearance of the West and its songs. Lomax’s use of the phrase “unpeopled West” reveals that he is participating in the rhetoric of the imperial erasure of the first “folk,” the first “savage” outlaw element, of the West, Native Americans. In this reading, Native Americans were a dangerous *element* of wilderness, not another civilization. To make way for the new “folk” this dangerous element had to be removed,

and more than the “goldseekers” or “Uncle Sam’s soldiers,” the cowboy, claims Lomax, is responsible for “the conquest of the West”: “The cowboy has fought back the Indians ever since ranching became a business and as long as Indians remained to be fought” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xxi-xxii). And once there were no more Indians to be fought, as one song included in the collection, “The Old Scout’s Lament,” suggests, the cowboy’s time fades into memory:

These fighting days are over;  
The Indian yell Resounds  
No more along the border;  
Peace sends far sweeter sounds.

But we found great joy, old comrades,  
To hear, and make it die;  
We won bright homes for gentle ones,  
And now, our West, good-bye. (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] 118)

The vestige of the “changing and romantic West of the early days lives mainly in story and song” and in the figure of the cowboy, the instinctual, “animating spirit of a vanishing era” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xxiii). The cowboy’s animating appeal was not just a result of his pioneering individualism, but also his chivalry. The cowboy “is truly a knight of the twentieth century” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xxiii). Lomax’s reference to the chivalric myth of frontiersmen and the West was certainly less calculated than Jesse James’ manipulation of the myth. In fact, it was a tradition Lomax witnessed as a boy in

the years following the Civil War when Texas cowboys competed in medieval-style tournaments, calling themselves knights (*Ballad Hunter* 15-17). Lomax was not blind to the rough and outlaw ways of the cowboys, however, whose relaxation after the long drive from Texas up to Dodge City “led to reckless deeds,” gambling, and “[d]runken orgies, reactions from months of toil, deprivation, and loneliness on the ranch and on the trail, [which] brought to death many a temporarily crazed buckaroo” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xx). Many cowboys, Lomax notes, were men who had lit out for the frontier not for adventure, but to escape the law. Most cowboys, Lomax implies, representing again the continuation of a much more ancient tradition, “emigrated West for the same reason their ancestors had come across the seas. They loved roving; they loved freedom; they were pioneers by instinct” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xxi). Instinct is again presented as both apart from and a part of tradition. The outlaw traits of the cowboy are excused as a necessity of living on the frontier, but when in the presence of civilization, the cowboy interacts in a chivalrous manner. Lomax’s appeal to chivalric tradition in respect to the reckless ways of the cowboy reveals the betwixt and between role of the cowboy/outlaw and his role in making way for civilization while remaining outside of it. In Lomax’s summation the cowboy can play both the frontier and the civilized role.

In fact, the cowboy would often become civilized as evident in his resignation to domestic life in songs like “The Old Chisholm Trail” and “The Kansas Line.” According to Lomax, “Not nearly so often . . . as one might suppose, did he die with his boots on. Many of the most wealthy and respected citizens now living in the border states rode the ranges as cowboys before settling down to quiet domesticity” (*Cowboy Songs* [1910]

xx). Thus, while Lomax is attempting to preserve the romantic heritage of the West, he is inadvertently reinforcing the national civilizing of it by domesticating the cowboy/outlaw as if at the end of the long trail (past Dodge City nights) there's a "home on the range," or in town, waiting to be settled. In keeping with the romantic tradition of the epic settling of the West, therefore, the less-than-admirable actions of the cowboy/outlaw can be overlooked for what they accomplished and would become: future outstanding citizens. The figure of the cowboy becomes a metaphor for the making of America. And even in their frontier life they, at times, represent the seeds for the expansion of the democratic tradition and voice of America. Lomax's description of how a cowboy song enters folk tradition, while certainly adhering to the contemporary theories of folk song, speaks to the democratic ideals of the founding of America: "Whatever the most gifted man could produce must bear the criticisms of the entire camp, and agree with the ideas of a group of men. In this sense, therefore, any song that came from such a group would be the joint product of a number of them" (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] xix). But Lomax leaves the democratic ideal of the folk voice as implied (if not unconscious), remaining more concerned with the ideal of the romantic tradition that was disappearing at the turn of the century and the importance of conserving the songs of that tradition.

The collection also demonstrates the tension between the North and South, with a more than subtle emphasis on the South, making the cowboy sound even more like Jesse James with inclusion of a song like "I'm a Good Old Rebel" (*Cowboy Songs* [1910] 94-95). Lomax makes this distinction even clearer in an additional editor's note to the 1938

edition, suggesting that many of the young cowboys came from Southern states after the Civil War, “roving and restless young blades from all over the South (and from everywhere else)” (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] xviii). “From such a group,” Lomax suggests, “given a taste for killing in the Civil War, in which Southern feeling and sentiments predominated, came the Texas cowboy and the cowboy songs” (*Cowboy Songs* [1938] xviii). This greater emphasis on the Southern roots of the cowboy in the later edition reflects the contemporary shift to both mythologizing and scrutinizing the Southern culture and history seen in the rise of the Southern Renaissance and important early critical studies of Southern culture. This Southern-shaded shift in presentation of *Cowboy Songs* suggests that, by 1938, the collection’s intent to be “popular” implicitly participated in the popular rise of interest in Southern culture while also still with a mission to preserve a vanished culture(s), both Western and Southern. This shift also reflects the growing relationship between Southern culture and folk music as a standard for authenticity, which began in the early years of folk music collecting and has continued to this day. Regardless of the emphasis on region, however, by 1938, folk music had popularly become an all-American affair, thanks, in no small part, to Carl Sandburg’s *American Songbag*.



## Brand New Bag and the Old, Free America

In a 1919 letter to Romain Rolland, Carl Sandburg, clarifying that he carried no communist card, but was rather more of an anarchist, explains his social and political leanings: “I belong to everything and nothing. If I must characterize the element I am most often active with I would say I am with all rebels everywhere all the time as against all people who are satisfied” (*Letters* 169). In the same letter, after reiterating his alliance with rebellion and the Russian Bolshevik program through “unrest, discontent, revolt and war,” Sandburg states, “I am against all laws that people are against and I respect no decisions of courts and judges which are rejected by the people” (*Letters* 169-70). Clearly, this is the voice of a man who demands from America what its dream promised. It’s a voice from, as Kenneth Rexroth suggests, “the old free America” (BR8).

Rexroth’s 1968 review of *The Letters of Carl Sandburg* poses a generational, regional, and ideological problem with the assessment of Sandburg as a poet and cultural figure in a post-WWII, countercultural context. To a poet of this cultural milieu, Sandburg’s letters seem “strange and old and far away” (Rexroth BR8). For an alienated, post-WWII generation, Rexroth assesses, Sandburg, who died in 1967, is dismissed “as a kind of foxy grandpa of the establishment” (BR8). The ideals he held seemed to be no longer authentic or realistic in this new society; they were relics of a society that vanished with the First World War. After the war, “Sandburg changes, and year by year he becomes more assimilated to the new society which was emerging in post-war America. His attitudes, which were authentic in the older America, persist; but since

they have less and less relationship to reality, they become more and more sentimental” (BR8). Regardless of the transgressive views he expresses in the 1919 letter or in the epic poem *The People, Yes* (1936)—300 pages comprising an almost anthological collage of folk culture, its wisdom, humor, and protest—Rexroth views Sandburg and his work as becoming increasingly emasculated as the America he represented faded into the past and even became caricatured as old fashioned, lending itself to “false rallying cries of reaction” (BR8).

But there’s something more symbolic in seeing Sandburg in this light during the 1960s because he’s so representative of the Midwest, a region that, by the 1950s and 60s, had come to represent America’s heartland, suggesting core American values that seemed so outdated in the turbulent times. The Midwest had become representative of the Establishment, and as the stereotypical narrative of the youth culture suggested, it was from the heartland of America that youths were fleeing to major countercultural areas in the country, most notably San Francisco (such as North Beach and later the Haight-Ashbury area) and New York (Greenwich Village). Rexroth sets up this demographic structure in addressing the problem of the counterculture generation’s acceptance of Sandburg’s work. How might this problem be rectified? How might Sandburg’s values and the old, free America from which they spring find a common thread with a generation and culture that might view his work and life as “outlandish” (BR 8)?

Rexroth’s answer: it’s through folk culture and song, what Sandburg celebrates in *American Songbag*, that this generational and cultural gap could be bridged. As

Rexroth sees it, the American folksong is “one of the principal foundation stones, perhaps the cornerstone, of the counter-culture . . . It is through songs that Sandburg first made popular that the old free America in which he grew up was to transmit, as through the narrow channels of hundreds of capillaries, its value system, its life blood, to a generation that ignore him or looks on him as a joke” (BR8). And it just so happens that the countercultural centers Rexroth emphasizes, San Francisco and New York, in contrast to the Midwest, were also important centers in the folk music revival.

Paradoxically, then, the old, free America, as representative of the values of an outlaw or counter culture, and yet core ideological values of American culture in general, stemmed from an almost repudiated heritage, as if this post-WWII cultural improvisation on traditional values had no concept of its traditional roots. Such is the performative force of the folk milieu—its potential energy and ability to transgress traditional boundaries such as region, class, or race without wholly negating them. This is the implication of Sandburg’s *American Songbag* as an anthological collection. Sandburg’s structuring of the collection and comments made in addition to the actual songs suggests that “[e]ach folksong stored the energy of a restless democratic society that . . . was not as strictly segregated as class-based ideologies might assume; each song seemed to reveal, at the moment of its transmission, the otherwise hidden system of communications through which America’s cultural life, observing no social boundaries, genuinely flowed” (Cantwell, *When We Were Good* 96). Sandburg doesn’t dismiss the social boundaries entirely, organizing the collection by means of national, regional, occupational, stylistic, thematic, historic, and cultural genres that do not so much

separate as flow into and among each other as a hidden system of communication. In doing so, he widens the scope of the consideration of American folk, allowing for voices of all regions, class, and racial heritage across the country: “Pioneers, pick and shovel men, teamsters, mountaineers, and people often called ignorant have their hands and voices in this book, along with minstrels, sophisticates, and trained musicians”

(*American Songbag* viii). The songs included, in addition to representing a diversity of American voices, also give historical accounts of American progress and heritage from the settling of pioneers and major wars to the development of the American folk voice in song, including the influence of border songs from Mexico and songs of English and Irish immigrants. For Sandburg, “[t]his is precisely the sort of material out of which there may come the great native American grand opera” (*American Songbag* viii).

A distinctive voice in this grand opera is Poor Boy’s, whose varied appearance throughout the collection demonstrates the outlaw and marginal system of communication that flows from section to section and song to song. There are the literal “poor boys” represented in the “Hobo Song” section, which demonstrates the tension in praising the life of bumdom and recognizing its stark realities. “Wanderin’” expresses this tension while sounding like a hobohemian improvisation on the Poor Boy tradition:

My daddy is an engineer,  
My brother drives a hack,  
My sister takes in washin’  
An’ the baby balls the jack,  
An’ it looks like

I'm never gonna cease my wanderin'. (189)

There's also the implied Poor Boy tradition in the "Blues, Mellows, Ballets" section. Although the traditional "Poor Boy Blues" is curiously absent, the mythic Boll Weevil appears as a trickster version of the Poor Boy in "De Ballet of de Boll Weevil." "Poor Lonesome Cowboy" is included in "The Great Open Spaces" section thanks to John Lomax's contribution to Sandburg's collection. "Po' Boy," a jail song, appears in "Dramas and Portraits," telling the tale of a man sitting in prison whose lost his mother, father, sister, and true love because "she ran away with another man, po' boy" (32). And likewise, in "Coon Can (Poor Boy)," found in the "Southern Mountains" section, the narrator finds himself in jail after his mother warns him on her deathbed to quit his "rovin' ways." (310). Finding an ironic place in the "Lovely People" section, "Ten Thousand Miles away from Home" is another variation on this particular Poor Boy song where the narrator is so grief stricken by the loss of his girl (and implicitly, a settled, normal life) he kills the man she's with, in some versions, but in the end feels "ten thousand miles away from home / And I don't even know my name" (456). In the brief, humorous ditty "What Was Your Name in the States?", included in the "Pioneer Memories" section, there too is a sense of the Poor Boy tradition; driven from an established home to outlaw territory even a person's name is lost to an alias, lonely anonymity, or even, positively speaking, a new life. The bum, the outlaw, the outcast, and the marginalized, the many roles and voices of the Poor Boy are allowed to be heard, singularly and together, as part of the great American opera.

By 1927, one would think that this voice could hold a prominent place in American culture. “Race” and “Hillbilly” record sales were booming, but it took decades for these recordings to make their way into the forum of American folk music, primarily, no doubt, because of their marketing for popular consumption. At that point they were part of a popular music trend that sought to yoke folk authenticity with popular culture, making them unfit for proper folklore study. Sandburg’s collection somewhat reflects this marketing impulse by espousing the popular and performative virtue of folk songs as a means to express a collective identity in mainstream society in addition to the older impulse of preserving the folk voice in order to solidify an American identity that included the marginal as well as the mainstream and cultured voice. Sandburg saw his collection of folk songs as something that was integral to an understanding of the historic and poetic American voice. The folk songs included in the collection would give students of American history a side and voice of its history that was not found in books “to be read and not sung” (*American Songbag* vii).

As a singing history of America represented by 280 songs arranged in twenty four sections, the collection includes a diverse selection of material. As diverse as the collection is, however, these were not the songs school children sang as part of their education in 1927. As Garrison Keillor notes in his introduction to the 1990 edition of *The American Songbag*, “schoolteachers and school singing books showed a marked preference for sentimental songs about home and family, that taught a moral, that promoted proper values of patriotism, industry, cleanliness, and reverence for God” (viii). No doubt, the crisis in values and concern with the state of American society that

arose at the turn of the century (such as the attempted censure of stories marketed for children that made heroes of outlaws like Jesse James) and into the 1920s (i.e. institution of the Volstead Act) precipitated this pedagogical focus, channeling the popularity of sentimental ballads of the nineteenth century. Notoriously, however, the Jazz Age had an outlaw impulse that ran counter to these types of songs and moral teachings. As a part of this cultural and artistic boom, Sandburg's collection, even though it was comprised of old songs, participated in the impulse to push the boundaries of established culture and society.

The collection was a singing history in which everyone could take part and make rather than to which merely resign themselves. Not only was *American Songbag* a collection of "outlaw" voices in American culture and a rebuke to those "who culturally have not yet come over from Europe," but it was also, implicitly, a collection that could both educate those who had recently come from Europe and include them in the new culture (vii). The collection came at a time when immigrants were significantly shaping American culture. And just as the movies were assimilating immigrants to American life, so too could the folk songs by opening the performative space for everyone and affirming that they could also have a voice in folk performance. Although Sandburg never seemed to stress his immigrant roots, the immigrant issues facing American culture certainly hit close to home.

Carl Sandburg's parents were a different sort of pioneer than those John Lomax celebrated. Swedish immigrants who had settled in Galesburg, Illinois by the time Sandburg was born in 1878, they were representative of the increasingly more prominent

immigrant pioneers who settled in America. Perhaps this background gave Sandburg a much more open sense of what constituted the American folk voice. Like Lomax, he demonstrates the connection between the European folk songs that made their way across the Atlantic and the new ones made in America. Sandburg didn't discriminate when it came to differing views on the American folk voice, however, including a range of comments by aficionados and academics in his collection. From Lomax and his voice of the frontier to noted folklorists like Cecil Sharp who believed that the "only distinctive American culture" was in the Southern mountains (because they demonstrated a residual British culture), Sandburg gives the professional folklorists' voices as varied a perspective as the songs (*American Songbag* 306). But Sandburg treats this continued folk communication and cultural heritage as something different than the way it counted for someone like Lomax. While Lomax might see this folk process as an historical trend, Sandburg treats this communication as a participatory state with an emphasis on the difference between tradition and evolving immigrant culture.

Ironically, Sandburg's collection somewhat shores up the borders of America while celebrating the diversity of the country's heritage. The collection sub-textually reflects the national efforts during this time to stem immigration, with anti-immigration laws passed from 1917 to 1924 that prevented nearly any immigration from particular regions of Europe (southern and eastern) and Asia. In closing American borders to many immigrants there was a greater emphasis on the Americanization of those who had already settled in the country. The national concerns of the time reflected, as Gary Gerstle argues, "an insistence on the racial superiority of the 'American' people, an



intolerance of political radicalism, and an opposition to cultural pluralism” (83). Thus, somewhat paradoxically,

This movement for immigration restriction strengthened the racist tradition of American nationalism precisely at the moment when Americans are often thought to have dispensed with ‘older’ notions of racial hierarchy and embraced the freewheeling thinking and behavior of the Jazz Age. Civic nationalism did not disappear at this time; to the contrary, many Americans turned to this latter tradition as a way of defending those who had been racially stigmatized and of reasserting the egalitarian foundation of American life. (Gerstle 82-3)

*American Songbag* incorporates this civic nationalism, which includes all Americans, even the marginalized and stigmatized.

In the process of Americanizing recent immigrants and incorporating the previously marginalized voices of America, a focus on the romantic tradition of the frontier had to be de-emphasized in order to make room for the expression of other aspects of American history with which newly-arrived immigrants and the marginalized could claim some connection. This shift meant that not only the past, but the present and future needed to be celebrated in ways that included all Americans. *American Songbag*’s all-inclusive scope works toward this aim as Sandburg characterizes the collection as being “as ancient as the medieval ballads brought to the Appalachian Mountains; it is as modern as skyscrapers, the Volstead Act, and the latest oil-well gusher . . . a glorious anthology of the songs that men have sung in the making of America” (*American Songbag* viii). Here we see the familiar rhetorical move found in Lomax’s introduction.

It connects the American folk voice to more ancient traditions. In light of the greater emphasis on Americanizing immigrants during this time, however, this move does more than just give validity to a tradition. It suggests that part of the heritage of America came from the same places as the immigrants. Additionally Sandburg juxtaposes the ancient with the modern, which provides a progressive stake in the present and future as well as highlights the work accomplished in between by all Americans that went into “the making of America.”

The central impulse of *American Songbag* is to celebrate and encourage the performative aspect of folk culture as American identity. This impulse gives resonance and force to the collection’s incorporation of a diversity of voices that disrupts regional, social, racial, and class distinctions in forming an American identity through the restless, democratic energy of the folk song. The performance emphasis also espouses an expressive history not found in conventional history books. In fact, Sandburg claims in the introduction, the collection “is so intensely and vitally American that some who have seen the book have suggested that it should be collateral material with the study of history and geography in schools, colleges, and universities; the pupils or students might *sing* their answers at examination time” (viii). If the singing exam were actually adopted, participation in the whole of American historical and geographic character would have been intensely more performative, upping the ante on an education that, at that time, was more of an execution of rote recitation than invested participation. The songs collected in *American Songbag* could serve as entertainment, but they were also performative, in the potential force they carried, like a speech act. For Sandburg, these songs were

expression, communication, participating in and making American culture even though many of the voices in the collection were often excluded, marginalized, or just plain outlaws.

“[T]his is a book of *singable* songs,” asserts Sandburg, “It is for the library, but it belongs in the music corner of the library, or on the piano, or on the back porch, or at the summer cottage, or at the camp, or wherever people sing songs and want new songs to sing” (viii). Rather than a textual artifact to be filed or read chronicling the folk voice, the emphasis, different than more academic collections, is on performance. Sandburg, the poet who harnessed the voice of the people in his works, makes no literary claims on the collection, allowing that only a few of the songs might serve as enduring lyric or narrative poems. But even with these more poetic songs, like the rest of the collection, their full force is only felt in performance, and “[o]nly by singing . . . will some of the airs open up their best slants and glimpses” (ix).

Even the process in which the collection was compiled and constructed was, in large part, performative. Sandburg did collect a number of the songs from print collections, but he also learned songs from friends and fellow enthusiasts across the country, spending time with people like John Lomax, who would sing the songs to Sandburg. Before publication of *American Songbag*, he performed these songs for audiences across the country, further investing himself in the songs. When it came time to make musical arrangements for the collection, Sandburg “would usually sing it for the composers” to work out a proper inscription (*American Songbag* ix). This largely oral transmittance from collecting to composing demonstrated an investment in the

traditional perpetuation of folk song at the same time that it contributed to the more modern impulse to make a record of this transmittance. Including a written version, however, wasn't to imply that one had to perform the song in a similar manner. In one song introduction, Sandburg instructs to sing it "as you like it," emphasizing his advice in the prefatory notes, "If you like a particular air and would rather sing it in a way you have found or developed yourself, departing from the musical expressions indicated, making such changes as please you at any given moment, you have full authority to do so" (ix). Thus, the final authority on any performance lies with the performer, whose own developed arrangement can reflect his or her unique character and lives.

The collection is also performative in the theoretical sense of attempting to construct an American identity through "marshaling the genius of thousands of original singing Americans" (*American Songbag* vii). The further implication is that one might join in with one's own original singing voice, thereby performing one's self as an American, part of the larger community, while holding intact their originality and the authority/ability to do so. Any individual may participate in carving out his or her identity among the many, to sing about their experience. In the pages of *American Songbag*, "Honest workingmen and hardened criminals sing their lives; beloved vagabonds and miserable miscreants are here" (viii). This makes for a dynamic American identity in which individuals might share their experience and negotiate their place in society. In "De Blues Ain' Nothin'," we see this kind of negotiation, an ability to face one's social state and improvise on it.

Ah'm goin' down on de levee,

Goin' to take mahself a rockin' chair.

If mah lovin' man don' come

Ah'll rock away from there,

Mhm, mhm!

'Cause de blues ain' nothin'

No, de blues ain' nothin'

But a good man feelin' b-l-u-e. (*American Songbag* 235)

We don't know why the man left the singer of these lines, but it's implied that the harsh, back-breaking conditions of levee work had something to do with their separation. And yet, instead of letting this social state (in which levee work may be the only work her man can get) overwhelm her, she rocks herself away from there and dismisses its social force by singing that it's not the levee work that gives weight to the blues, but rather the individual: the blues ain't nothin' but a good man feelin' bad, or "b-l-u-e," in this case. A song like this need not be sung by a woman, of course, and each song is open to any individual performance. "The singing of a ballad," comments Franz Rickaby, included in a preface to the lumberjack section of *American Songbag*, "is a free and unconfined process. The story is the clear unmortgaged possession of the personality whose lips happen to be forming it at the time" (288). It's the performer who gives a song performative force with the weight of identity, character, and investment.

Sandburg talks of the America portrayed in the collection's pages as a "pageant," an "opera," a "scene," for all intents and purposes an American stage drama in the grand tradition of Greek drama. Invoking the Greek tradition, Sandburg calls *American*

*Songbag* a “terribly tragic book and one grinningly comic” but also turns on this invocation to spoof it, to de-stabilize the tradition and classic performance in that “each page lifts its own mask,” not letting the song performance become a static role, but one that can both reflect and disrupt the role (*American Songbag* viii). For Sandburg, “a song is a role. The singer acts a part. He or she is a story-teller of a piece of action. Characters or atmospheres are to be delivered” (*American Songbag* ix). The folk song is representative of tradition and the role is a performative space. In filling the role of a song, inhabiting its narrative space in time and, in this case, American history, the performer expresses his or her unique voice which can both challenge and/or reinforce the tradition. Playing the role of the folk singer/storyteller always includes the opportunity to assume an outlaw or trickster position much like those found in ritual or social drama. As Victor Turner argues, “The great genres, ritual, carnival, drama, spectacle possess in common a temporal structure which interdigitates constant with variable features, and allows a place for spontaneous invention and improvisation in the course of any given performance” (*Anthropology* 26). Like any part to play in a social drama or rendition of a song that occurs in a liminal space, the performer will bring his or her experience, character, and perspective into that traditional space, transforming it by an improvisation on tradition. Sandburg describes a similar process in the introductory remarks to “Liza in the Summer Time (She Died on the Train)”: “This may be an instance of the song that starts among people who have a tune, who want to sing, who join together on an improvisation, reaching out for any kind of verses, inventing, repeating . . . in the end comes a song that pleases them for their purposes” (*American*

*Songbag* 308). The opposite can be true, of course, when a performer inhabits the role and conforms to it, but this wouldn't be "authentic." The book, after all, says Sandburg, marshals "the genius of thousands of *original* singing Americans" (*American Songbag* vii, my emphasis).

Garrison Keillor notes how Sandburg constructed himself via the folk troubadour and vagrant kicking against the pricks, filling the performative space of his public existence with nothing of himself, but rather a raucous choir of folk from every walk of life: "his troubadour persona had no room in it for himself, only for Sailors, Negroes, Hoboes, Prisoners, Workers, the romantic heroes of the American Left" (xi). Keillor also notes the happy euphony of *Songbag* and Sandburg, suggesting it was no accident in the light of Sandburg's knack for self-promotion and publicity. It also suggests further that the performative role of Sandburg the public figure was merely a vessel for the voice of the folk. Along a similar line, Benjamin Filene notes the definite symbolism of Sandburg, rather than some folk illustration, appearing on the cover of the first edition of *American Songbag*, suggesting that Sandburg "realized that he needed a star to serve as exemplar and expositor of folk traditions" (45). And in this spirit, Sandburg, who would often end lectures and readings with a performance of a few folk songs, "the folk song collector helped Sandburg the folk song popularize by being folk singer and folk hero as well" (46). In the end, there was plenty of Sandburg, the man and his aesthetic, social, and political attitude, in his troubadour persona. The folk music and persona simply magnified these things. Sandburg's persona and *American Songbag* helped to make popular a pattern of existence that gave voice to the undercurrent of mainstream

American culture and society. Released 25 years later, Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* planted the seeds of creating many more folk performer/heroes whose weird, ghostly voices transmitted the restless force of this pattern of experience to a post-WWII generation.

#### Authentic Pop-Hiss Revenants and the Old, Weird America

His name was Nipper, the dog in Victor Talking Machine Company's famous trademark image. The logo was based on a Francis Barraud painting, *His Master's Voice*, which depicts his deceased brother's dog responding to a recording of his former owner. In the painting, the dog's response suggests a sense of recognition and uneasiness, or maybe curiosity. Drawn to the recording by a familiar voice, Nipper's nose hovers in the opening of the sound horn as if he were sniffing a stranger.

In 1952, this sense of uncanniness, the familiar seeming strange, could very well describe the experience of listening to Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. By this time, many of the voices found on the *Anthology* hadn't been heard commercially since the onset of the Great Depression. Most of the performers stopped recording and performing altogether by the early 1930s, returning to the mines, factories, and farms they came from when the recording boom of the previous decade diminished to a fraction of its sales and, subsequently, recording output. Of the performers, only the Carter Family continued to record somewhat regularly, and in 1952, even though the



original group disbanded in the early 1940s, Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters (Maybelle's daughters, Helen, Anita, and June) could be heard weekly, performing at the Grand Old Opry. Also in 1952, Uncle Dave Macon, a long-time Opry member and perhaps the oldest performer (born 1870) included on the *Anthology*, died. Macon was an energetic and indomitable performer who nevertheless was more of a nostalgic figure when he died (his last commercial recordings were in 1938), albeit an immensely important one because his long career poised him as a link to the history and the progress of American folk music from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. The rest of the performers on the *Anthology* were more like revenants: Nipper's master calling him after a long absence.

They could've been gone for ages as far as the post-WWII generation, which had never had the chance to hear people like Mississippi John Hurt, Dock Boggs, Clarence Ashley, Charlie Poole, Canon's Jug Stompers, and Blind Lemon Jefferson on record, could tell. It wasn't like companies reissued these records either. The recordings might have seemed like they came from a parallel universe rather than from the same world, but twenty-five years earlier. Smith chose to focus on records made from 1927, "when electronic recording made possible accurate music reproduction," to 1932, "when the Depression halted folk music sales" (Smith, "Handbook" 1).<sup>28</sup> The great displacement of time (not just years, but enormous historic events that greatly altered American society and culture) between when these voices were recorded and when they reappeared on the

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<sup>28</sup> Smith's handbook to the *Anthology* doesn't have page numbers, but since it's only twenty-six pages I've taken the liberty to assign it page numbers as an easy reference.

*Anthology* recalls Michael Lesy's observation that the seventy-year-old photographs and newspaper stories he collected in *Wisconsin Death Trip* "changed from the most ordinary records of the most ordinary events into arcane remnants, obscure relics, antique mementos" ("Introduction"). The recordings on the *Anthology* run the gamut of subject matter from everyday and historic events (social gatherings, technological progress, assassinations, the Titanic) to folklorish, supernatural tales (a demon lover returned, Mr. Frog slaying rival suitors for Miss Mouse's hand, vampire railroad men), and it's easy to forget that much of it was a matter of public record, like the news articles collected in *Wisconsin Death Trip*. In fact, in the notes to the songs on "Ballads," the first of the three volumes that make up the *Anthology*, Smith includes condensed summaries that read like newspaper headlines. For instance, "Fatal Flower Garden" bears the headline; "GAUDY WOMAN LURES CHILD FROM PLAYFELLOWS; STABS HIM AS VICTIM DICTATES MESSAGE TO PARENTS" and "Bandit Cole Younger" is summarized as "BANK ROBBER VOICES REGRET FOR ASSOCIATION WITH JAMES BOYS IN NORTHFIELD FIASCO" ("Handbook" 2, 4). Emphasized by the newspaper summary form, Smith suggests that not only were these commercial recordings, but they were also a record of American history, experiences of "the folk," records of faith, and even the seemingly fantastical stories have some root in actual stories; the ones that don't, or can't be traced, still survive as public record because they've been perpetuated for centuries. It no longer matters if they're a chronicle of actual life.

“These lost, archaic, savage sounds seemed to carry some peculiarly American meaning,” remembers Jon Pankake of his first experience hearing the *Anthology* in 1959 (27). Eric Von Schmidt and Jim Rooney recalled the feeling that all of the performers on the collection were long dead, “*Had to be*” (qtd. in Marcus *Invisible Republic* 94). Others, like Mike Seeger and John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers set out to see if they could find some of these performers, and some were found. Tom Hoskins, a college student, tracked down Mississippi John Hurt in 1963 by taking a clue from Hurt’s “Avalon Blues” and finding him still alive, if long retired from the music business, in Avalon, Mississippi.

There’s something unique in responses like this to an anthology of music that was compiled from commercial recordings, some of them quite popular when they were first released. In one sense, it demonstrates that times had changed immeasurably since they were first recorded. But there’s also another sense that these revenant, outlaw voices were reconnecting listeners to a forgotten or marginalized heritage they felt both drawn to and estranged from, unsettled. This response to the *Anthology* is partly behind Greil Marcus’ reservations in describing the uncanny effect of the collection by borrowing Rexroth’s description of the folk milieu Sandburg represented.

For Marcus, Rexroth’s “old, free America” “cut Americans off from any need to measure themselves against the idealism . . . Americans have inherited. By fixing the free America, the true America, in the past, those words excuse the betrayals of those

Americans who might hear them” (*Invisible Republic* 89).<sup>29</sup> The old, weird America and the old, free America: what’s the kinship and/or difference between these two different American territories transmitted through the folk milieu? “Old” and “America” survive in both, suggesting a heritage forgotten and/or disjunctive with the present, but nevertheless present in the myths of American culture and society. This leaves us with the difference between weird and free. What is it about free that cut Americans off from the past rather than old, which, one would think, is the modifier that fixes the true America in the past?

As discussed in the first chapter, freedom has a number of definitions and can be seen in both positive (freedom *to*) and negative (freedom *from*) terms. A basic definition of free suggests the absence of obstacles, physical or ideological boundaries, and the ability or state to choose whatever existence one desires. An older definition qualifies this basic definition with social and cultural status by equating freedom with nobility, which is a qualification that is still somewhat relevant. When we consider free within the context of the tension between American democratic ideology and reality, the term contradicts itself, for it’s a word that only applies to those privileged enough to exercise the ability to make their own choices in life. Those who are outlawed (or outcast) are not

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<sup>29</sup> Marcus’ reading of the phrase is somewhat problematic and difficult to consider since it’s done out of context. Judging by Marcus’s works cited for *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (1997), it’s evident that he didn’t actually read Rexroth’s phrase in the original book review, but came across it in Robert Cantwell’s *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (1996). What Marcus finds problematic with the phrase, that it “cast Americans out of their own history,” is the actual problem Rexroth is addressing, but, as we saw, Rexroth attempts to bridge that mythical past to the present via the spirit of “the old free America.” The phrase, for Rexroth, is not supposed to cut Americans (the counterculture, anyway) off from history, but include them.

granted or are incapable of exercising this privilege. The tension/contradiction—we might call it uncanniness—between the ideology and the actual, when recognized, socially and culturally translates the free to weird.

But more than emphasizing the social and cultural contradiction in free by calling it weird, there's a distinction between free and weird that speaks more to the unsettling experience of the old, weird America. Free and weird are different like the difference between idealization and befuddlement: weird not lending itself to any simple comprehension and free eschewing comprehension for hope, belief, faith. It's a difference between feeling at home, settled to the point where belief in free is without complication and feeling unsettled, weird, foreign. "Weird," however, doesn't cut one off from free. Again, it's the train to glory and nowhere that we saw in the last chapter. There's no abandonment of hope in the weird, but perhaps a resignation to the fact that hope doesn't necessarily beget freedom, settling; you grin and bear it and hope to come through the other side if you get lucky. "Free" is an ineffable idea. "Weird" is a feeling you just can't shake.

American society in the 1950s had an unsettling undercurrent of this tension between free and weird that couldn't help but express itself in literature and popular culture. For instance, Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons* (1953), a book-length poem that began as a folk ballad, presented this tension historically by conjuring the ghost of Thomas Jefferson to face and accept the darkly violent crime of his nephew, Lilburne Lewis, murdering a slave with a meat cleaver. The poem affirms the unavoidable complicity everyone shares, even though rebuked, in the nation's past,

juxtaposing a weird, violent impulse with pure idealism, leaving the poet/narrator, R.P.W., to negotiate the tension. A listener overcome by the weirdness of Smith's collection had to face a similar negotiation in 1950s Cold War American society, with its attempt at perfectibility through consumerism, conformism, and purging of elements that were un-American.

Clearly, this analysis places a lot of social and cultural weight on a folk anthology that had more of a cult or aficionado following—Pankake called it the brotherhood of the *Anthology*—than a mainstream audience. Folk music at this time, however, was feeling this weight. All of a sudden, folk music, or rather, folk musicians, along with many other people in the performing arts had been classified as un-American. Perhaps most prominently, the Weavers, who had significant commercial success in 1950, were forced to disband by 1952 because of their political leanings. The entire group was under FBI surveillance, Pete Seeger was blacklisted, and both he and Lee Hays were called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). The individual songs included on the *Anthology* and the collection as a whole is a return of the repressed, the 'un' of America that was actively being repressed in the early 1950s by the likes of HUAC. It seems that the post-WWII American culture of conformity was doing all it could to keep the perceived uncanniness of American life repressed. This very process of repression of a subject that refuses to be repressed demonstrates the qualities of social drama described by Victor Turner:

[T]he relationship between quotidian or workaday social processes (including economic, political, jural, domestic, etc., interactions) and cultural performance

is dialectical and reflexive, the pervasive quality of the latter rests on the principle that mainstream society generates its opposite; that we are, in fact, concerned in cultural performances with a topsy-turvy, inverted, to some extent sacred (in the sense of ‘set apart,’ hedged around with taboo and mystery) domain of human action” (*Anthropology* 24).

The *Anthology*’s release during this time was a metaphor for the effects of this repression, a manifestation of the opposite generated by the scrutiny of what “American” really means. The resonance of the *Anthology* as a cultural performance that runs counter to mainstream society played a significant role in the counter-cultural folk revival that began in the latter half of the decade.

The folk song connection Rexroth makes between Sandburg’s old, free America and the revival’s generation speaks to the dominant traditional role of folklore in an increasingly modern and fragmented society. It serves as a foundational element to make sense of the connection between the past and present, a way to preserve the presence of core American ideals and identity that might seem all but lost in turbulent and unsettling times when these ideals can seem strained to the point of loss and rupture. In the intermediary years that separated these two generations, the folk voice was alive and well: becoming increasingly more prominent in popular culture (the recording boom of the 1920s and early 30s and popularity of collections like Sandburg’s, the Lomaxes’, and B.A. Botkin’s *Treasury of American Folklore* [1944]), more socially and politically charged as a means to protest (the rise of the Popular Front and performers like Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie), and conversely, much more of a presence in government

social relief (the Depression-era Works Progress Administration and Farm Security Administration) and education (WWII Office of War Information) programs in addition to the creation of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress in 1928. During this time, the cultural folk voice clearly became less of an artifact and more of a performative and usable medium as suggested by Sandburg's comments in *American Songbag*.

The changing trend in folk music being treated as something more than an artifact, but something that could continue to grow and even find a place in popular culture was perhaps addressed first and most favorably by Alan Lomax in 1940. Lomax listened to approximately three thousand commercial folk recordings from the 1920s and 30s and compiled a list of 350 representative albums for the Library of Congress. His listening experience resulted in a

certainty that American folk music, while certain folklore specialists have been mourning its decline, has been growing in new directions to compete with "thick" commercial music, and that it is today in its most "distorted" form in a healthier condition, roving the radio stations and recording studios than it has been or ever will be in the notebooks of collectors. (*List of American Folk Songs on Commercial Records* 1)

Alan Lomax's conclusion puts Harry Smith's collection in perspective relative to earlier anthologies. The 78 rpm records Lomax catalogued had a much greater effect on the mass consumption of folk music than any print collection. This dissemination of music also provided greater emphasis on particular performers rather than the anonymous



collective folk voice that had been traditionally the prerequisite to classifying the authentic folk voice.

Even with Lomax's early endorsement of certain aspects of commercial folk music—he did, after all, still scrutinize the recordings to distinguish which ones were more authentic than others—Smith was still challenging the concept of traditional folklore by focusing on commercially-recorded music. We mustn't forget, however, that much of this music was forgotten, the artists forgotten, and Smith's treatment of the music was anthropological in method. In the foreword to his *Anthology* handbook, Smith sounds somewhat like a traditional folklorist:

Only through recordings is it possible to learn of those developments that have been so characteristic of American Music, but which are unknowable through written transcription alone. Then too, records of the type found in the present set played a large part in stimulating these historic changes by making easily available to each other the rhythmically and verbally specialized musics of groups living in mutual social and cultural isolation. (1)

Additionally, to emphasize the forgotten nature of the recordings, Smith gathered the recordings like refuse, finding them at used record shops, thrift stores, and warehouses where records were gathered as material to contribute to the war effort. In a 1968 interview, Smith remembers finding (in 1940) the first record that sparked his interest in the particular folk milieu his collection represents, “a Tommy McClellan record that somehow got into [his hometown] by mistake. It sounded strange” (“Interview with John Cohen” 70). It was in the basement of a former funeral home converted into a Salvation

Army shop in Seattle that he remembers hearing Uncle Dave Macon for the first time. To Smith, these were exotic voices “in relation to what was considered to be the world culture of high class music,” in which he found a unique quality that he’d been attuned to by his parents: “my mother sang Irish songs all the time, and my father sang cowboy songs. But they were naïve of the implications of it” (“Interview with John Cohen” 70, 72). One of many books Smith’s father brought home from the library was *American Songbag*, which got Smith interested in the Child ballads. When Smith began collecting the exotic records from which he would cull his *Anthology*, he eventually turned to Lomax’s list of recordings, using it for the very intent for which Lomax had compiled it: “in order that the interested musician or student of American society may explore this unknown body of Americana with readiness” (1).

Despite the difference of Smith’s *Anthology* from previous textual collections that treated folk music as artifacts to be preserved, however, the *Anthology* was self-consciously an artifact, but one with performative force because of its sound element and distinct mixed textual and visual components. The collection suggested that a folk music anthology could go beyond preservation of a vanishing folk voice or encouraging the perpetuation of that voice through performance. Smith considered the *Anthology* as a collage, thinking of it “as an art object” wherein he could pursue his interest in “the patterning that occurred in [music]” (“Interview with John Cohen” 81, 85). He was interested in folk music as a part of a larger system of meaning underlying distinct social and cultural experience: “It has to do with the desire to communicate in some way, the collection of objects” (“Interview with John Cohen” 79). As a result of his obsessive

record collecting, Smith sensed “definite correlations between different artistic expressions in one particular social situation” (79).<sup>30</sup> In his peculiar aesthetic anthropology, Smith wasn’t “looking for authenticity; instead he was searching for structure” (Perchuk 7). Thus as an “artistic collagist and taxonomic collector, Smith locates nonverbal ways of ordering information and then communicating these formations so as to make transhistorical patterns, the deep structures of society, emerge for the viewer or listener” (Perchuk 7).

Everything about the *Anthology* was unsettling when it was released. It’s packaging, record format, the infamously-eclectic handbook, everything about it defied conventional record releases: “The whole bizarre package made the familiar strange, the never known into the forgotten, and the forgotten into a collective memory that teased any single listener’s conscious mind” (Marcus, *Invisible Republic* 95). The format, particularly, was an innovation on recording tradition, putting 78s that had no business being together other than in catalogues (which were originally separated by race anyway) on 33 1/3 LPs, a technology that was only five years old when Smith gave the final arrangement to Moses Asch. The result transformed, disrupted, and blurred boundaries, unsettling the social and cultural context of the original recordings as well as the anthology’s contemporary social and cultural norms through a process of defamiliarization.

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<sup>30</sup> Sometime around 1945, when Smith tracked down Sara Carter (retired by then), he attempted to test out his theory by photographing her patchwork quilts and also asked her to “name certain designs [of her quilts] which she thought resembled certain songs” (“Interview with John Cohen” 74). His theory wasn’t proven with the exercise, but he nevertheless continued thinking in this manner, although perhaps even more systematically and elementally.

One of the major boundaries the juxtaposition of performances blurs is the music industry-imposed color line. Making the familiar distinction between “race” and “hillbilly” (black and white) records strange was closer to the truth of cultural exchange that had always been present in the forming of an American folk tradition. Perhaps in 1927 anyone hearing Frank Hutchison’s performance of “Stackalee” would have known he was white even though the song is an African American badman ballad because it was released as a hillbilly record. On the *Anthology*, however, Hutchison’s race isn’t as clear (even the washed-out picture included in the handbook is somewhat ambiguous), nor does it matter. The ambiguity worked the other way too. Smith was delighted, he told John Cohen, that it “took years before anybody discovered that Mississippi John Hurt wasn’t a hillbilly” (83). Identity, overall, became ambiguous. Even Smith apparently had no idea about the real identity of The Masked Marvel (a pseudonym used by Charlie Patton) whose “Mississippi Boweavil Blues” (1929) appears on the *Anthology*. The collection, like Patton, masks itself through performance in a space outside of social and cultural laws.

In addition to the effacement of racial qualifiers or distinctions, Robert Cantwell argues, Smith’s meticulous choice and arrangement of songs conjures a comprehensive effacement that yields up an imagined people of no-race, no-time, no-place, a “folk” in the sense that in certain conditional passages of our ‘unofficial’ or unstructured existence we are all “folk,” people-as-such prepared by the disarming oddness of the sounds, and by Smith’s continuous sequencing that tends to defer or subvert any intellectual closure. (“Darkling”199)

The deferment and subversion of boundaries that group and/or exclude people negates our expectations, erases differences that we impose. Here, Cantwell can sound a bit idealistic, but if we consider what it means when boundaries are subverted, other than the appearance that we are all indeed “folk,” it also becomes an opportunity for the individual to differentiate his or herself from the group. It would be naïve to think that all of the subverted and deferred boundaries are not still present. It’s just that they don’t matter, they can be shifted, and each individual performance emerges on its own accord almost in the manner that Sandburg describes the way a performer inhabits a role when performing a traditional song that he or she makes his or her own. Greil Marcus, sounding very much like Sandburg, makes a similar remark commenting on Smith’s choice of performances: “[T]he recordings he chose testify to the ability of certain artists to present themselves as bodies, as will, as desire, as saved, as damned, as love, as hate—as if singularity removed them from the musical historiographies and economic sociologies where scholars have always labored to put them” (“Uncle Dave Macon” 184). Each improvisation on tradition becomes a cultural performance of identity that distinguishes itself as part of and apart from the tradition.

The songs included on the *Anthology*, Marcus argues, “leave the listener with a sense of jeopardy, uncertainty, a morbid sense of past and future” (“Uncle Dave Macon” 183-84). It’s the same feeling one might have after reading Faulkner’s tale of Emily Grierson. But perhaps Marcus’ description over-estimates the effect of gothic weirdness on listeners in the 1950s up to the present. Could a collection of music really have this much performative force? Maybe not everyone who hears the *Anthology* feels this sense

of jeopardy, uncertainty, or morbidity. In fact, Marcus tells of a group of professors (from various disciplines) who reacted much differently when they listened to the *Anthology* (including the recently-issued fourth volume). He found himself “completely out of [his] depth,” unsettled, when they began discussing the songs (“Uncle Dave Macon” 179). No one heard what he was hearing, nor were they drawn to the same songs as Marcus, but to songs he’d never really “heard” in all of his years of listening. An art history professor, to Marcus’ near-bewilderment, called Uncle Dave Macon satanic and another professor seconded, citing Macon’s reveling yell of “Kill yourself!” in “Way Down the Old Plank Road” (“Uncle Dave Macon” 179). Marcus had never thought of this shout as anything but celebratory. And why shouldn’t it be? Twice, earlier in the song, Macon shouts “Glory Hallelujah!” to accompany his frantic banjo and stomping feet. Did these other professors simply not hear such a happy and pious shout? But then again, the song is from the perspective of an almost licentious convict working on a chain gang, dreaming about what he’s going to do when he gets back to Richmond or wherever: look at pretty girls in “Chatanooga,” get married (two days after he buries his first wife), eat meat, drink whiskey, and go find some more pretty girls to look at. The one thing he won’t do, as the refrain vows, is “get drunk no more way down the Old Plank Road,” which seems to be the reason why he’s found himself on the chain gang (although he also lays part of the blame on a woman named Doney). Just what did happen on Old Plank Road? All of a sudden, after years of listening, upon the suggestion that Macon is an agent of Satan, Marcus hears “Kill yourself!” and Macon “sounds huge, like some pagan god rising over whatever scene he’s describing, Dionysus not as master

of the revels but as their judge” (“Uncle Dave Macon” 179). The point of Marcus’ anecdote is to emphasize the uncertainty that can be felt by the listener *and* the uncertainty of the performances, how they can change over time and from listener to listener. Each performance (including the same recording heard in a different historical context) is an unsettling of tradition, a disruption of uncertainty that allows for a new reading/listening of a song that can draw us in with a celebratory “Glory Hallelujah!” that masks “Kill yourself!” as a fun-loving revel (which it really is), but also give us a weird, unsettling feeling if we consider that the latter could be a mask for the former.

We don’t have the classifying divisions of previous folk music collections on the *Anthology*, which, structurally, leaves the collection open to this ambivalence of response. Here, they’re distinguished as ballads, social music, and songs. This structural flow seems to suggest that perhaps Smith saw each “genre” as merging into each other, the stories/historical accounts make way for social rituals, celebratory and religious, and finally the songs, which distills these together somewhat into individual performance. In the liner notes to volume four of the *Anthology*, John Fahey suggests that the cultural and social trend of the development of “songs” was a result of increasing alienation of the folk:

Lyrically speaking, songs, as opposed to ballads and “social music,” are more personal and emotional—indeed they represent the new spirit of individualism among the folk, as more and more folk found themselves disenfranchised from plantation or from factory, or from small guild, AND the folk family, with its traditional support system began to disintegrate, AND the community fell apart,

AND all relationships, institutions, customs, morals were thrown into question.

(85)

The development of songs, as implied by the *Anthology*'s structure, punctuates the alienation from traditional social and cultural structure that lay beneath the more collective forms of balladry and social music, which, in the form Smith presents, surfaces even more noticeably.

There is a distinct, although subtle, structure to the entire *Anthology* that serves as an anchor, like tradition, amidst the potentiality and improvisational aspects—the stock, floating verses called upon by the performers, the feeling that many of the performances respond to one another—of the performances. The collection is as much a history as it is a gathering of different examples of the American folk voice. It's structure somewhat mirrors the development of the American folk voice while also including a historical view of America by and from the viewpoint of those left out of conventional history books. The first five selections of “Ballads,” the first volume, are variations on ballads found in Francis Child's collection, beginning with the earliest included, “Henry Lee” (Child 68), and progressing in number to “Old Lady and the Devil” (Child 278). The next five ballads are British in origin, leaving the remaining 17 ballads of the first volume, which are distinctly American. This progression of ballads implies the historical development of the American folk ballad. The second volume, “Social Music,” demonstrates a similar structure of progression, but in terms of two different thematic strains: instrumental developments (chiefly on the first record of the volume) and a shift from dancing, “sinful songs” (on the first record) to religious songs



(on the second record), the latter demonstrating distinct developments in religious performances. There are a number of sub-thematic and corresponding strains throughout the first two volumes—including a distinct grouping of outlaw ballads on the first volume—too many to address here. Instead, we'll focus on the last volume of the collection, "Songs," because the particular selections were most popular among the revivalists, and the final volume is both a distillation of the previous volumes and a commentary on the entire collection, highlighting the sense of alienation and displacement Fahey discusses.

The first album of "Songs" opens with Clarence Ashley's "The Coo Coo Bird." The fragmentary verses and imagery—many of them floating verses that appear in other folk songs such as the opening verse, which appears in Macon's "Way Down the Old Plank Road" (on the second album of the volume)—are held together by the cuckoo, a bird that makes its home in others' nests, giving the song the implicit theme, as Marcus suggests, of "displacement, restlessness, homelessness" (*Invisible Republic* 118). "By its own nature," the cuckoo is "an outsider, a creature that cannot belong" (*Invisible Republic* 118). In this context, the opening verse becomes somewhat ironic: "Gonna build me / Log cabin / On a mountain / So high / So I can / See Willie /When he goes /On by." The log cabin is merely a temporary home for the narrator, waiting to see Willie pass by. Sitting high upon the mountain, the narrator looks down upon the land, but to what end? The isolated narrator could be seen as an observer of the territory the volume traverses, making temporary homes and picking up "Poor Boys" along the way. The majority of the first album of "Songs" deals with troubled relationships, establishing

an unsettled mood throughout as if these failed relationships signal an inability to settle down, perhaps summed up in Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rabbit Foot Blues": "This not being my home, don't think I'll stay." The inability to settle, to find oneself as a restless outcast, a creature that cannot belong, a cuckoo bird, becomes even more explicit with "Poor Boy Blues," which appears as the first selection on the second album of the volume.

Structurally, as the opening selection, "Poor Boy Blues" mirrors "The Coo Coo Bird," emphasizing the connection between the two. The Poor Boy/outlaw strain becomes more explicit by the grouping Smith arranged. Smith notes that "Poor Boy Blues" and the four proceeding selections are "probably facets of a single folk-lyric complex" ("Handbook" 14). Two of the group, beside "Poor Boy Blues," reference Poor Boy directly. Dock Boggs' "Country Blues" is similar to the traditional "Coon Can (Poor Boy)," wherein the narrator's mother warns him to quit his rowdy ways or he'll find trouble at his door; and he does, landing in jail and contemplating the "corn whiskey [that] has surrounded [his] body, poor boy."<sup>31</sup> Julius Daniels' "Ninety-Nine Year Blues" mentions a vengeful Poor Boy, threatening to "kill everybody that drag poor boy down."

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<sup>31</sup> Boggs' "poor boy" phrase can sound almost like an off-hand, idiomatic interjection, although it does contrast the other seemingly off-hand, idiomatic phrase, "good people," that appears in the first line of most of the verses. At this point, and thinking back to the "poor boys" discussed in the previous sections, it should be noted that the phrase "poor boy" often appears in southern music, in a similar way that certain floating verses, such as the opening verse of "The Coo Coo Bird," can be found in a number of songs. More than being a convention, however, these utterances mark a certain mood. It says you're listening to the blues. It says, "I'm like all those other poor boys in all those other songs and you 'good people' know what I mean." It's a reaching out for community when none is available at the time of the utterance. Notably, this utterance often arises in a context of violence, economic and physical decay, homelessness, and scrapes with the law. In the string of "poor boy" songs found on the last side of the *Anthology*, Smith is perhaps attempting to address this convention, because it's apparent that he is deliberately intertwining these songs consecutively based on the phrase and subject matter.

All five songs of this Poor Boy folk-lyric complex find Poor Boy in trouble with the law and/or in jail. The sixth selection on the record, Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," predicts the inevitable end of these Poor Boys: "Have you ever heard the church bells toll? / Then you know that the poor boy's dead and gone." This predicted death is no end to Poor Boy's troubles, but perhaps he begins to get the message as the songs start to move toward Poor Boy's departure. Following a pair of Uncle Dave Macon performances, both dealing with jail and chain gangs, Mississippi John Hurt's "Spike Driver Blues" gives Poor Boy a choice to take flight as he contemplates the fact that it's "a long ways from east Colorado, honey, to my home." He might hop a train to anywhere but where he is, taking a cue from the tales of John Henry: "John Henry was a steel drivin' boy, but he went down." Thematically, perhaps he does hop that train, indicated by the two following selections that deal with trains, but to where?

Apparently, out west to the Texas plains. The second to last song on the final album seems to come from nowhere. Ken Maynard's "The Lone Star Trail" is the only cowboy song on the entire *Anthology*. Granted, as Smith notes, the song is "one of the very few recordings of authentic 'cowboy' singing," so choices for inclusion of cowboy songs were limited ("Handbook" 17). Ironically, Smith distinguishes it as a "talkie hit," but this isn't what is so strange about the appearance of a singing cowboy at this point in the *Anthology* ("Handbook" 17). As Cantwell notes, Maynard's song about cowboy life on the trail is almost comic, and it seems out of place as if it's an unconscious slight to John Lomax and the cowboy as *the* voice of America (*When We Were Good* 230).

Thematically, however, the song fits because the narrator is a “lonesome cowboy,” and like the many cowboy songs in Lomax’s collection, as well as the poor boys of Smith’s, he’s unable to settle. He dreams of a settled home with the right girl, but knows he’ll stay on the trail until he’s too old to ride. Still, the lone cowboy loping onto the scene with his high-pitched yodel seems like a disjunctive segue, but to what?

The final song, Henry Thomas’ “Fishing Blues,” seems to channel the comedy of the cowboy’s appearance, turning the cowboy’s easy gait upon the scene into a jaunty, excited frolic, Thomas’ quill playing hurrying along Maynard’s lazy yodel. It seems nobody has ever been as excited about going fishing as Thomas is in this selection. The almost celebratory mood of “Fishing Blues” epitomizes what Robert Cantwell sees as the movement of the final record of the *Anthology*. After all the tension and outlawry, “the set approaches its concluding side, [and] begins its movement toward freedom and transcendence” (*When We Were Good* 236). Perhaps Cantwell is right, but there seems to be something else happening here that further explains the cowboy on the plains and the happy fisherman. Structurally, keeping in mind Smith’s apparent attention to detail, it’s no coincidence that the first and last songs of the final volume are performed by a lone musician with the last name Thomas. They’re different Thomases, but there’s a sense that the laconic “Poor Boy” Ramblin’ Thomas has transformed into the joyful “Fishing” Ragtime Texas Thomas. What are we to make of this transformation, as well as the Texas cowboy that precedes it? What’s more, we might trace this transformation back further to the first song of the first record of “Songs.” The isolated narrator of “The Coo Coo Bird” has likewise become the fisherman, coming down from the mountain to

the shore of outlaw territory, Poor Boy heaven, a purgatory (where else, but in the liminal space between heaven and hell) pleasant enough where one might fish forever without being hassled. Cantwell's theory that this represents some sort of transcendence certainly works with this perspective, but we might also look to another source to understand the significance of this movement.

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, 30 years before Smith's anthology, but just as race and hillbilly recordings are taking off, seems an unlikely key to understanding Smith's structural choices. Maybe he wasn't thinking of Eliot's poem at all, but it sheds light on these choices and the *Anthology* as a whole. In the conclusion of *The Waste Land*, the fisher king sits upon the shore after leaving his "decayed hole among the mountains" from where he hears a rooster "Co co rico co co rico," now "Fishing, with the arid plain behind [him]" (424). He questions himself, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (385, 392, 425) This movement corresponds directly to the narrator of "The Coo Coo Bird" high on the mountain in his cabin as the cuckoo bird hollers coo coo on the fourth day of July, later finding himself on the shore as Henry Thomas, fishing, with the arid plain that Ken Maynard's lonesome cowboy is riding across behind him. There are also other correlations to be noted. To name a couple, there's Eliot's "Tolling reminiscent bells" (383) and Blind Lemon Jefferson's death knell in "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," and there's also Eliot's mention of "dry bones" (390) and Bascom Lamar Lunsford's song on the "Social Music" volume, "Dry Bones." In this context, and the context of the release of Smith's anthological modernist collage in 1952, the *Anthology* can be seen as an attempt to set the American social and

cultural land in order, arranging the fragments that “have shored against my ruins,” the marginal, outcast, flotsam of modernity, outlaw voices of a fragmented, displaced, and alienated American society (Eliot 430).

## CHAPTER IV

### THE OUTLAW AS PERFORMER: LEAD BELLY, THE MURDEROUS MINSTREL

Po' Howard's dead an' gone,  
Lef' me here to sing this song.

— Lead Belly “Po' Howard” (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs* 74)

If anybody should come along and ask you, good people,  
Who composed this song,  
Tell 'em it Huddie Ledbetter,  
He's done been here an' gone,  
He's a-lookin' for a home.

— Lead Belly “The Boll Weevil” (*Negro Sinful Songs*)

Two movies about American folk musicians were released in 1976: *Leadbelly* and *Bound for Glory*. While both Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie made a name for themselves in the same folk music scene during the 1930s and 40s, the legacy of their lives, music, and experiences were marketed to the public in drastically different ways. The posters advertising the release of these movies clearly demonstrate this difference. Lines from the chorus of “This Land Is Your Land” stretch across the top of the *Bound for Glory* poster, and below, the advertising copy reads: “The man who wrote these words was Woody Guthrie. His music has become as much a part of America as its

mountains, its rivers, its forests and its people. His life has touched all of our lives. This is his story.” The head tagline for *Leadbelly* reads: “Meet Leadbelly—a real man who’s a winner!” This is followed by: “They chased him down with dogs, chained him in iron, beat him with rawhide, slammed him in the sweatbox. They tried to bury Leadbelly, but Leadbelly wouldn’t lie down,” because, as the final tagline proclaims, “You can’t bury a black legend like Leadbelly!” Aside from the almost comical disparity between these depictions of legendary folk musicians, what’s striking is the difference of treating Guthrie as a patriotic, rambling musician and depicting Lead Belly as a mythic folk outlaw figure. In fact, someone unfamiliar with Lead Belly could almost miss the fact that he was a musician. That is, if it wasn’t for the dramatic sketch of a bare-chested and mean-faced Lead Belly standing on railroad tracks with his chest out, feet chained, and clutching a twelve-string guitar by his side as if he were John Henry holding his mighty hammer.

Clearly, Paramount Pictures, in its half-hearted marketing push, targeted a black audience in the release of *Leadbelly* and sought to associate Lead Belly’s story with the popular blaxploitation film genre that emerged in the 1970s. The story of a rambling, black musician negotiating an existence between a violent, frontier-like or marginal culture and a racist society was just the sort of outlaw, anti-establishment narrative that characterized the genre. Forty years earlier, when he first gained national notoriety, Lead Belly’s bad man outlaw persona attracted the curiosity of white, mainstream culture rather than serving as a figure of black protest. While we might find the advertising copy for *Leadbelly* a touch too embellished, surely the news stories and headlines introducing



Lead Belly to New York City and the world sensationalized his story even more so and were equally racialized. A January 3, 1935 *Herald Tribune* article headlined, “Lomax arrives with Lead Belly, Negro Minstrel,” quipped, in a dramatically sibilant sub-headline: “SWEET SINGER OF THE SWAMPLANDS HERE TO DO A FEW TUNES BETWEEN HOMICIDES.” An April 1937 *Life* article danced around the racist rhetoric decidedly less so: “LEAD BELLY: BAD NIGGER MAKES GOOD MINSTREL.” This ambivalence and shift of Lead Belly’s popular reception recalls the complex ways John Henry’s story might be interpreted as well as the demonstrable shift of the outlaw figure in American society and culture in general. In Lead Belly’s case, the bad man outlaw persona that served as the root of his mythology and legend demonstrates a complex fluctuation between the criminal hard man (Stagolee) and moral hard man (John Henry), variations on the theme of the archetypal African American bad man as well as mainstream American culture’s fascination with the outlaw character.

Lead Belly’s nickname envelops the range of meaning in his cultural performance. By most accounts, Huddie Ledbetter earned his famous nickname in prison, most likely Sugarland, the Central State Prison Farm in Texas, while serving time for murder. He’d earned a name for himself because of his stamina and strength as a worker. He was “a rollin’ sonofabitch” by his own account (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs* 17). It was the prison chaplain, Reverend “Sin Killer” Griffin, Lead Belly claimed at one point, who gave him the name: “He says to me, you’re a hard-driving man. Instead of guts, you got lead in your belly” (Wolfe and Lornell 82). Lead Belly took pride in the name and his work, perhaps making the implied association with John

Henry, but the name was also an important aspect of his identity in prison. At Sugarland, a man without a nickname had no identity, Lead Belly explained, “He’s nobody with nothing. But give that little bug a pallet and he’s somebody with something” (Wolfe and Lornell 82). When Lead Belly became national news in 1935, this mark of prison identity became a cultural identity, suggesting both his prison experience and his folk authenticity. In the following years Huddie Ledbetter’s nickname became more distinctly his professional name, his performance persona and mark of his experiences as a performer, and finally, after his death, as Sean Killeen argues, “the measure and hallmark of his accomplishments and of his acceptance by society” (Robinson and Reynolds 20). “Lead Belly” encompasses a cultural journey from the “rollin’” hard labor of an outlaw and social outcast to the driving rhythm and booming voice of a legendary American folk singer.<sup>32</sup>

The Lead Belly legend has been re-told countless times since the first time John Lomax introduced him at the 1934 Modern Language Association conference in Philadelphia. As the popular story goes, by the age of 46, Huddie Ledbetter had sung his way out of two prison sentences, one for murder (in Texas) and the other for intent to murder (in Louisiana), by appealing to two governors for a pardon via song. There’s more to the story, of course: Huddie Ledbetter’s pre-prison days singing at Fannin Street barrel houses and saloons in Shreveport at the age of sixteen and performing with Blind

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<sup>32</sup> I’ve chosen the “Lead Belly” spelling rather than “Leadbelly” because that was how he spelled it and was originally known. Also, the Lead Belly Foundation has been encouraging the use of the original spelling. I have not, however, corrected the spelling in quotations where the “Leadbelly” spelling has been used.

Lemon Jefferson in Texas after he was “banished” from his Louisiana home at age eighteen; his escape from a Texas chain gang in 1915 and his life as alias, Walter Boyd; John Lomax’s discovery of Lead Belly at Angola State Prison in 1933, which eventually brought Lead Belly’s storied past to the public’s attention; Lead Belly’s association with the Left after his relationship with John Lomax dissolved; and the national popularity of his music, rather than his outlaw past, that exploded just six months after his death when The Weavers sold two million copies of their rendition of his “Irene” in 1950 (*The Leadbelly Songbook* 13). But through it all, the basis of his popular legend was his prison experience and pardon.

Lead Belly’s singing his way to a pardon perfectly exemplifies a performative utterance in Speech-Act Theory in that his pardon song had force enough to effect a result. Years later, as a free man, as a folk performer named Lead Belly, his performance constituted his cultural identity. In examining key shifts in the rhetorical purpose of Lead Belly’s bad man outlaw performance, the oft-told stories of Lead Belly’s mythology are unavoidable. Considering these stories in the context of the outlaw and the outlaw territory discussed thus far, however, adds another dimension to previous inquiries into Lead Belly’s life and career. From the cementing of Lead Belly’s early mythology in John and Alan Lomax’s *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, the first full-length treatment of a folk musician as such, to Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell’s thus far definitive biography of Lead Belly’s life and Benjamin Filene’s assessment of the Lead Belly/Lomax relationship in *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music*, much has been brought to light in the attempt to understand Lead Belly’s place in

American culture. Filene, particularly, adds valuable insight into Lead Belly's role in the development of a folk cult of authenticity that tapped into the outsider populism of the 1930s. This partly helps to explain the appeal and cultural force of Lead Belly's performance. The folk outlaw dimension, however, adds something to this: it acknowledges Lead Belly's agency in this process, his disruption of and improvisation on the culturally contradictory bad man/minstrel role in which he found himself and the impulse to make his mark on the traditional music he performed: "Every song that had come to his hand he had changed, because he wanted the songs to become distinctively his own" (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs* xii).

#### Left Me Here to Sing this Song: Poor Howard's Legacy

Huddie Ledbetter's early life and musical experiences need to be considered briefly in order to understand fully the foundation of the Lead Belly myth and the role he played in it by cultivating and participating in a musical tradition that reached back more than twenty years before he was born (in 1888). While in 1935 it may have seemed like Lead Belly was "a walking anthology of unwritten songs" that appeared like some archaeological find, or simply as a "natural," as John Lomax described him to suggest Lead Belly's primitive and instinctual talent and habits, Huddie Ledbetter paid his musical dues and understood the tradition in which he invested himself (Robinson and Reynolds 44, 31).

When Lead Belly sings a traditional song like “Poor Howard” he’s well aware of the tradition and the performative force of the song. “Po’ Howard’s dead an’ gone, / Lef’ me here to sing this song” is not an empty statement. He’s filling the role, singing Howard’s song and making it his own. Poor Howard, Lead Belly explains, “played a fiddle. He was the first fiddler after Negroes got freed in slavery times. Po’ Howard was a Negro, used to play for ‘em at the sooky jumps and the number he played it was ‘Po’ Howard, Po’ Boy”” (“Monologue: Square Dances, Sooky Jumps” *The Library of Congress Recordings*). This explanation could very well be Lead Belly’s own creation, but the song, as well as another fiddle tune, “Green Corn,” he played on guitar at country dances at the age of fifteen most likely originated in slavery times or just after, as his story suggests. By the time Huddie was performing the song, Poor Howard’s original—no doubt jubilant—fiddle tune carried a similar cultural weight as “Poor Boy Blues,” as if the freedom expressed in the original music was shaded by the placelessness of the words. As Lead Belly sings in 1935: “The day I lef’ my mother’s do’, / The day I lef’ my home; The day I lef’ my father’s do’, The day I lef’ my home” (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs* 75). Huddie Ledbetter could’ve been condensing his own life in these lines, because as soon as he’d made a name for himself as a musician at dances in Caddo Parish, he exiled himself to the violent sporting life of Fannin Street.

Some local trouble, fathering an illegitimate child and nearly murdering a man, prompted him to leave his parents, Wes and Sallie, but Huddie was more than willing to go to Fannin Street. By the age of sixteen, he was already a father and “a respected singer, musician, and dancer; a brawler and scrapper; and a ladies’ man, but all of this

was only in a small farming community near nowhere” (Wolfe and Lornell 29). Huddie wanted to make a name for himself, almost as a rite of passage; “soon as my mamma put long pants on me, I flew out the do’. When you git long pants, you oughta ac’ like a man” (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs* 7). He still had a lot to learn about life and music, and the liminal space of Fannin Street culture was important in this rite of passage. The Shreveport sporting district was essentially “a crucible of violence” outside of the law; “the dens and dance halls of the bottoms were as far removed from the courts and the police and due process as were the remote hamlets around Caddo Lake” (Wolfe and Lornell 33). In fact, most of the spaces in which Lead Belly performed until he became famous in the 1930s pulsed with potential violence that erupted often, as when he was stabbed in the neck at a house party some time after his first release from prison in the mid-1920s while playing a song he’d written about Fannin Street.

In “Mister Tom Hughes’ Town” (or “Fannin Street”)—named, ironically, after the Shreveport sheriff who would help put Huddie Ledbetter in prison five years after he’d been pardoned—Fannin Street’s musical influence can be heard. Lead Belly learned to imitate on his guitar the rolling bass lines of barrelhouse piano players he heard. Although it bears the stylistic mark of Fannin Street, the song is more about Huddie’s leaving home for outlaw territory, against the tearful protestation of his mother. As Lomax notes in his introductory remarks to “Mister Tom Hughes’ Town,” Lead Belly “prophesies his destiny and at the same time accepts and defies it” when he sings “Mamma, you don’t know— / Women in Shreveport gonna kill me, why don’t you let me go” (*Negro Folk Songs* 167, 170). They did almost kill him by disease, and he

returned home two years later to convalesce. More importantly, Lead Belly dramatizes this moment like John Henry's boyhood prophesy that he'd die with a hammer in his hand, and also, this rite of passage was the space in which he forsook a settled life on the farm with his parents.

Forsaking the settled life cost Huddie and his parents a lot. In 1915, the farm his father worked so hard to scrape together would be sold away to pay for legal fees when Huddie was sentenced to thirty days on the Harrison County (Texas) chain gang for carrying a pistol. Three days into his sentence he escaped, eventually taking his first wife, Lethe, with him to Bowie County (Texas) and assuming a new identity as Walter Boyd. By then, Lead Belly had started playing the twelve-string Stella guitar which became his trademark. Twelve-string guitars were somewhat unique at this time, particularly in Texas, and because he'd gained some notoriety as a songster, he couldn't perform in the area if he wanted to conceal his identity. He didn't abstain long. His impulse to perform, his attraction to the sporting life, and his need to break up the monotony of physical labor soon found him playing dances and juke joints in the area. Even though Walter Boyd was calling attention to himself, Harrison County authorities never got the chance to catch up with him because in 1918 he was sentenced to seven to thirty years for the murder of Will Stafford.

Over the next sixteen years Lead Belly would spend eleven of them working on prison farms. He served nearly seven years for shooting Stafford before Texas Governor Pat Neff pardoned him. In 1930, Lead Belly found himself in Angola State Penitentiary (sentenced to 6-10 years) for assaulting Dick Ellet, "a splendid white citizen of

Mooringsport,” as attested by Sheriff Tom Hughes, with a knife, a crime which almost got him lynched before trial (Wolfe and Lornell 97). Not only did Lead Belly learn to work the system through his musical performance (i.e. gaining special privileges and, of course, a pardon) during these prison stretches, but he also expanded his repertoire, especially at Sugarland, to include prison songs and work hollers like “Midnight Special,” “Shorty George,” “Go Down Old Hannah,” “Old Rattler,” and “Old Riley.” These songs express frustrated freedom, the harshness of working conditions, a mythical tale of Rattler, the meanest hound dog there ever was, and a mythical tale of Riley, the one prisoner who outran even Rattler by walking on water and disappearing in the woods forever. Of course these were subjects with which the inmates could sympathize, and the songs were popular among them. Yet, as Wolfe and Lornell note, while other prisoners sang these songs, they did so passively, simply “accepting the old songs and passing them on” unchanged (84). Lead Belly, on the other hand, “couldn’t stifle his churning creativity. He had to put his stamp on many of the songs . . . add and change to fit his personal view of the world” (84). This included adding direct references to local lawmen and prison personnel. Lead Belly was doing more than just adding local color to traditional songs, however; he was playing to his audience, trying to make his performance unique and win them over as he would when he pleaded his case to Governor Neff through a “spontaneous” pardon song. Lead Belly’s singing for freedom resonated with Poor Howard’s original emancipatory fiddle reel in an uncanny way. It marks the tension between freedom and imprisonment in Poor Howard’s legacy: Poor Boy’s frustrated quest home.



## Let Me Go Home: Making the Myth

Huddie Ledbetter didn't actually sing his way out of Angola State Penitentiary, nor was John Lomax responsible for Lead Belly's early release, even though he did attempt to deliver a recording of Huddie's new pardon song to Louisiana Governor O. K. Allen. As Tyehimba Jess suggests in his poem, "leadbelly: mythology," however, fact can become myth by striking out a few key words, striking out that which makes Lead Belly's story less popularly appealing. In this case, Jess simply uses the text of a 1939 letter from Angola's warden to a New York City probation officer and crosses out the words that discount the Louisiana pardon myth:

He received ~~no~~ clemency  
and his discharge was a routine matter  
under the  
~~good time~~  
law (72)

But why strike these facts from the record? Who benefits? Lead Belly? John Lomax? The media? To a certain extent, everybody benefitted. Lead Belly might have hated wearing his prison work clothes when he began performing with John Lomax acting as emcee and lecturer, but he was making money and spreading his self-proclaimed reputation as the king of the twelve-string guitar. John Lomax might have hated how newspapers sensationalized Lead Belly's story, somewhat de-emphasizing the importance of the music, but the publicity made it possible for him to reach more people

with the American folk voice he collected as a ballad hunter as well as boosting his own reputation. Popular culture and the media were certainly entertained by such a story.

Prison and gangster movies were emerging as popular genres in the 1930s. *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), a movie that informed the American public of the inhumanly harsh conditions of prison farms and chain gangs, the very conditions Lead Belly endured, was nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award in 1933. Also in 1933, the real-life subject of the story the movie was based on, Robert Elliott Burns, won his legal battle to avoid extradition back to Georgia (from New Jersey), where he'd escaped from a chain gang twice. Lead Belly's publicized arrival in New York City in January 1935, just four months after his release from Angola, no doubt plugged into this popular interest.

So everyone benefitted in some way, but Lead Belly had to do the most "performing" within developing the myth and shoring up his reputation. John Lomax could simply be John Lomax. The media and public didn't have to do anything but be drawn to the fantastic myth of a violent man who sang himself out of jail twice and who also just so happened to be a Rosetta Stone of American folk music: this bad man couldn't have been released under the good time law, which was a routine reduction of sentence based on good behavior. Lead Belly, on the other hand, had to negotiate a number of different roles in performing. Foremost, he was not just a former convict with talent, but a black man, which conjured the stereotypical racist figures of the minstrel and the "bad nigger," and he somewhat had to play these roles in his performance. He was also an outsider as a poor, under-educated, lower-class Southerner in New York

City, performing in front of predominantly white, academic, and upper-class audiences. And to folklore aficionados he was a “walking anthology of unwritten songs,” a key representative of a primitive folk voice untouched by “modern” popular music (Robinson and Reynolds 44). Negotiating roles such as these, playing to his audience and strategically positioning himself through performance—playing the minstrel to his own end—was talent he cultivated while in prison.

Lead Belly learned the hard way that he had to work the system if he ever wanted to feel even the slightest bit of freedom. After an unsuccessful escape attempt only a year into his sentence for the Stafford murder, when he nearly drowned himself rather than let them take him alive, Lead Belly changed his tune and became the hardest worker in the camp. Sometime around January 1924, Texas governor Pat Neff visited Sugarland. The camp captain arranged some “house entertainment” for the governor’s visit, and Lead Belly got a chance to see just how persuasive his performance could be. Songster that he was, Lead Belly could play just about any type of song depending on the audience and situation. After dancing for Neff and his wife, particularly a number he called “The Sugarland Shuffle” in which he imitated a crazed cotton picker sprinting up and down rows, and performing some traditional tunes requested by the Governor, such as “Old Dan Tucker” and “Down in the Valley,” Lead Belly performed an “improvised” song addressing the Governor:

In nineteen hundred and twenty-three

De judge took my liberty away from me, (repeat)

Left my wife wringin' her hands and cryin',

"Lawd have mercy on de man of mine." (repeat)

Told my wife 'fore I left de lan',

Never no more see her, do de best she can. (repeat)

"Goodbye, Mary,

Oh, Mary." (repeat)

"I am your servant, compose this song,

Please, Governor Neff, lemme go back home. (repeat) (Lomax and Lomax,

*Negro Folk Songs* 225-6)

His plea for pardon never mentions the fact that he was serving time for murder. Nor are the biographical facts correct: Lead Belly was found guilty in 1918 (1923 sounded better, musically), and his wife at that time was Lethe. These omissions were not due to forgetfulness nor because the seeming improvisational performance made exactitude difficult. In fact, the song was not an improvisation at all, but a calculated rhetorical performance intended to win the Governor's favor.

When he heard that Neff was visiting, Lead Belly composed the song in bed while everyone else slept, writing it down, something he rarely did, in order to craft it just right. By Lead Belly's own account, he was trying to appeal to the Governor's religious sensibilities (not to mention his emotions) by "put[ting] Mary in it, Jesus's

mother, you know” and reference to “a verse from the bible, around about the twenty second chapter of Proverbs, around the fourteenth verse: if you forgive a man his trespasses, the heavenly father will also forgive your trespasses” (Lead Belly is actually referring to Matthew 6:14) (*Private Party* Track 20). Lead Belly’s performance did sway the Texas Governor who won office with the promise that prior abuses of pardoning by the former Governor would not continue. Lead Belly would have his pardon, but not until the Governor felt sufficiently entertained. After the performance, he told the songster, “Walter, I’m gonna give you a pardon, but I ain’t gonna give it to you now. I’m gonna keep you down here to play for me when I come, but when I get out of office I’m gonna turn you loose” (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs* 21). One could read in the Governor’s comment echoes of antebellum slavery and white paternalism on top of the contemporary attitude of the Jim Crow South and wonder why Lead Belly never vocalized any contempt in being treated as some comic minstrel. But then again, not only was this dynamic something that Lead Belly had lived with all of his life, he was facing a seven to thirty-year sentence for Stafford’s murder, and unknown to Neff and the state of Texas, Huddie Ledbetter a.k.a. Walter Boyd was a fugitive from a Texas chain gang.

Lead Belly found himself in a similar situation and social dynamic when John and Alan Lomax and their recording machine arrived at Angola State Penitentiary in 1933, three years into Lead Belly’s second major prison stretch. Had Lead Belly known John Lomax was going to record him, he most likely would have attempted to record another pardon song in the hope that the Louisiana Governor might hear it. He had

already petitioned for early release and sent a poem to the Governor. He wouldn't record "Governor O. K. Allen" until Lomax returned a year later to collect more songs. Lead Belly impressed Lomax during the first recording session, however, and he initially resolved to find a way to get him released so that he might accompany them on their recording tour of Southern prisons. When he learned of Lead Belly's previous prison stretch, Lomax was dissuaded from pushing the issue. Lomax may have changed his mind by the time he returned to Angola, though, because on July 1, 1934 he prompted Lead Belly to record the new pardon song. "Governor O. K. Allen" is lyrically similar to "Governor Pat Neff," but differing distinctly with Lead Belly's appeal in the former to the current economic downturn that was forcing the state to release inmates as a way to save money. Because the state had already decided to release, according to Lead Belly's recollection, three hundred and twenty-five inmates, he figured that it was just a matter of getting himself noticed. When Lead Belly was released a month after recording the pardon song, it appeared to him and the Lomaxes that he'd sung himself out of prison yet again.

It was beneficial for Lead Belly and the Lomaxes to believe this was the case. It was soon clear that Lead Belly's sentence was commuted under the good time law, but it was more appealing to treat Lead Belly's early release as another successful performative act, as suggested by the Lomaxes introductory comments to "Governor O. K. Allen": "although the Commissioner of the Louisiana Prison System, Mr. Hymes, says no, Lead Belly and we like to believe this song won his freedom. At least one can safely say that, but for his singing and guitar playing, Lead Belly would still be on the

Angola prison farm” (*Negro Folk Songs* 232). This connection gave Lead Belly a pretense to attach himself to the Lomaxes, who, from his position, had the connections that could get him noticed. They were, after all, recording for the Library of Congress. Also, it’s important to remember that Lead Belly had never been recorded until then, and on top of that, the Lomaxes thought he was a unique and important performer. At that point, to Lead Belly, John Lomax was in a position to help his career a great deal. For Lomax, Lead Belly was a prime example of the kind of folk voice for which he was searching. He also believed that having someone like Lead Belly accompanying him to prison recording sessions would loosen up the inmates and result in better recordings. However beneficial each saw their relationship, neither could have predicted that they’d soon appear on movie screens across the nation.

#### You’re a Mean Boy: The Murderous Minstrel 1934-35

It’s staggering to consider just how much happened in Lead Belly’s life from August 1, 1934, when he was released from Angola, to March 26, 1935, when he and John Lomax dissolved their relationship somewhat peaceably, but with a great amount of tension left between them, and Huddie headed back to Louisiana. It was late September 1934 when they began their “partnership.” Lead Belly was to be Lomax’s driver and help him record in prisons by priming the inmates via his own performances so that they had an idea of what kind of song Lomax was seeking. Three months later, Lomax

presented Lead Belly at the 1934 Modern Language Association conference in Philadelphia where he performed at a “smoker” wearing his convict work clothes and was seated on top of a table in the front of the room. A presentation/performance during a conference panel followed the next day. New York newspapers sensationalized Lead Belly’s story five days later. On January 11, 1935, the nationally popular *March of Time* radio program, which re-enacted top news stories of the day, included the story of their meeting with Lomax and Lead Belly playing themselves. Eight days later, William Rose Benet published “Ballad of a Ballad Singer,” a poem about Lomax and Lead Belly, in the *New Yorker*. The next day Huddie Ledbetter married Martha Promise with Alan Lomax as his best man and John Lomax giving away the bride. On March 8, Lead Belly and Lomax would again re-enact their story for a *March of Time* newsreel. All of this occurred within eight months of Lead Belly’s release from Angola, in addition to the many performances Lead Belly gave during this period and the close to 200 recordings he made—all of it a result of the encounter Lomax and Lead Belly re-enacted for the newsreel.

“To the Louisiana State Penitentiary goes John A. Lomax, Library of Congress curator, collector of American folk songs,” says the newsreel announcer as a prison-striped Lead Belly performs for a group of inmates while John Lomax records. By the end of the three and a half minute reel, Lead Belly transforms from convict to a knife-toting ex-convict who pledges his life to the man that helped get him pardoned, to a married man in a sharp suit ready for domestic life, and finally, a national treasure.

“[H]ailed by the Library of Congress’ Music Division as its greatest folk song find in 25



years,” the announcer chimes in near the end, “Lead Belly’s songs go into the archives of the great national institution, along with the original copy of the Declaration of Independence.” Could there be a more striking example of a person realizing the American Dream and exemplifying the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? But while the arc of his story is somewhat typical of the idealized dream, the circumstances certainly weren’t. Huddie Ledbetter was not the typical self-made man, at least no Ragged Dick. Rather, the tale of the “two time Dixie murderer” whose voice was preserved alongside the Declaration of Independence dispensed with the distinct moral lines of an American success story, clearly demonstrating the ever-presence of the outlaw beneath the ideals of American society.

Perhaps subconsciously the newsreel presents a fantasy of the American Dream, but on another level it also unsettles the dream. On the surface, it appears that Huddie Ledbetter becomes a reformed and civilized citizen. But this posturing is disrupted by his very identity being inextricably tied to his outlaw persona. The opening scene dialogue informs the public of Lead Belly’s Texas prison history. In the following scene, Lead Belly appears in John Lomax’s hotel room after he’s released from Angola, pledging, “I came here to be your man.” Lead Belly’s violent past is emphasized again by Lomax: “You can’t work for me. You’re a mean boy. You killed two men.” “Please don’t talk thataway, boss,” replies Lead Belly. Rather than suggesting that Lead Belly’s violent ways were in the past, at this point the reel reveals he hasn’t reformed entirely. Lomax asks him if he has a gun, and Lead Belly tells him that he has a knife. “What do you do with that thing?” asks Lomax. Lead Belly replies, “I’ll use it on somebody if they

bother you, boss.” These two scenes take up the majority of the reel, leaving the last third to suggest Lead Belly’s domestication by showing him at Lomax’s “home” in Wilton, Connecticut (it was actually a friend’s home they were using during the New York trip) singing to his new wife, and finally footage of his recordings being housed in the Library of Congress.

The marked presence of Lead Belly’s outlaw persona, potential violence, and placelessness that undercuts and disrupts this social reform and acceptance is reinforced by his performance of “Irene” in the newsreel’s opening and closing. The performance sets a tone that makes the surface American Dream uncanny. It’s nighttime and striped convicts lounge around as Lead Belly stands above them playing “Irene,” and John Lomax operates his recording machine. The convicts look almost placid, but with a slight hint of melancholy in their expressions as Lead Belly serenades them with a song that is both lullaby and tale of frustrated love. “Irene,” Lead Belly’s most famous song, shares the same 3/4 time signature of Brahms’s famous lullaby and “Rock-a-bye Baby.” Lead Belly’s waltzing guitar and the song’s refrain, “Good night, Irene, good night, Irene / I’ll kiss you in my dreams,” appear to be rocking the convicts to sleep and dreams of their own Irenes outside the prison. This juxtaposition of a group of men distinctly marked as violent outlaws by their stripes and the singer himself recognized as a murderer with the soothing lullaby resonates with the disjunctive tone of “Irene” itself. Underneath the gentleness of Lead Belly’s waltz and romantic longing lies a jarring potential violence with the narrator’s suicidal threats of drowning himself or overdosing on morphine (the latter is particularly resonant with the lullaby and dreaming theme) and

the ambiguous threat in the final refrain, “I’ll get you in my dreams.” The troubled relationship in “Irene” also undercuts the depiction of Lead Belly’s domestication later in the reel. The disruptive, uncanny tone of the opening scene is transposed beneath the closing footage of the Declaration of Independence with “Irene” playing in the background. This final juxtaposition unearths the outlaw territory within the Declaration, recognizing the document as an outlaw rhetorical performance that was transformed into a national treasure.

“Irene” is “a *tour de force* of ballad-making—using sweet, sentimental song from the nineteenth century to tell a realistic, salty story of Negro married life,” say the Lomaxes in their introduction to the song (*Negro Folk Songs* 236). “The repetitious, sugary refrain and the equally syrupy stanzas—contrast these with the blunt speech of Irene and her boy-friend, Lead Belly’s salty observations, and the fierce, soft casualness of the drama. The contrast is characteristically American” (*Negro Folk Songs* 236). As mythologized in the *March of Time* newsreel, Lead Belly’s story makes this contrast even more distinguishable with the juxtaposition of the unsettled outlaw and settled American society. Mainstream American society has set apart and incorporated the outlaw figure since the late nineteenth century, but this tendency became even more pronounced in the 1930s with its “outsider populism,” which “locat[ed] America’s strength and vibrancy in the margins of society” (Filene 64). We see this reflected in the popularity of “good man” outlaws during the time, as well as the various federal culture agencies that focused on the working class and poor. But as Filene points out, there’s an “oxymoronic quality” of posturing the outsider, the outcast, or outlaw as representative

of the people (65). While Lead Belly's cultural performance at this time seems to fit in with this cultural focus on outsiders, there's a distinct difference between his outlaw persona and cultural incorporation and someone like Woody Guthrie, who is more congruent with this idea of outsider populism. Lead Belly's place was more ambivalent and complicated because of his cultural association with the bad man outlaw and his minstrel-like negotiation of his role. The fact that he was a black convict who worked within the system to negotiate his freedom and distinct place in American folklore puts him in the company of John Henry, who symbolically also found his way to Washington as his story transformed the historical convict into a national folk treasure.

Even with this outsider populism contributing to public interest in Lead Belly's story, the minstrel/badman depiction dominated until Lead Belly became more involved with Popular Front audiences. Introduced as a "negro minstrel" in the January 3, 1935 *Herald Tribune* article, Lead Belly found himself in a situation similar to when he first performed for Pat Neff, attempting to play to his audience's stereotypical expectations and using the popularity of these expectations to his advantage. By the turn of the century, black minstrel or vaudeville troupes were taking full advantage of this type of subversive, yet lucrative possibility, performing on the Theater Owners Booking Agency circuit throughout the South. But Lead Belly performing the minstrel role carried more noticeable social weight than contemporary or prior instances of black minstrelsy. This social weight is played out in the characterization of Lead Belly and Lomax's relationship. Lomax's comment to Lead Belly, "You're a mean boy," and Lead Belly's response "Please don't talk thataway, boss," says everything about the dynamic of their

relationship. Although Lomax was twenty years Lead Belly's senior, calling Lead Belly "boy" certainly had more to do with Southern social custom, as does Lead Belly referring to Lomax as "boss." The external social tension on the relationship between Lomax and Lead Belly, imposed largely by traditional roles and practice in the Jim Crow South, is more exaggerated in the cultural performance of their relationship for mainstream audiences just as minstrelsy exaggerated stereotype to the point of disrupting and complicating the stereotypes. Audiences who saw the Lead Belly/Lomax newsreel witnessed a minstrelization of American society.

It was less than three weeks after Lomax and Lead Belly re-enacted their story for the *March of Time* newsreel that they went their separate ways. Part of it had to do with the roles they played, almost caricatured on screen, but real nevertheless. Lead Belly chafed under Lomax's paternalistic racism, and Lomax was frustrated by Lead Belly's increasingly stubborn acts of independence. The January 3 *Herald Tribune* article characterized their relationship as if Lead Belly was merely the Lomaxes' faithful servant: "For these two the Negro minstrel bears an undying affection which led him on September 1 to pledge to them his life and services till death should part them. He has followed them everywhere as chauffeur, handyman, and ever-ready musician and has asked for nothing but the privilege to continue" (Wolfe and Lornell 139-40). Looking back, it's easy to see John Lomax as the bad guy in this scenario. Without him, however, there's a good chance that Lead Belly would have never made a recording. Also, while Lomax's paternalism was exceedingly old fashioned and conservative, his intentions toward Lead Belly and his music seem pure. The issue of his infamous management

contract with Lead Belly that initially called for a 50/50 split, but was amended to include Alan Lomax so that each would get a third of the money, is often raised to demonstrate Lomax's taking advantage of Lead Belly. The structure of their public appearances, however, was arranged as part lecture and part performance. Clearly, Lomax considered the roles each played in these performances as equal. Still, Lomax was a man shouldered with some of the standard social prejudices and customs of his time. Lead Belly had to live with these same prejudices and customs.

In a way, Lead Belly's minstrelsy and his archetypal relationship with Lomax, which also represents the initial popular reception of Lead Belly and his relationship with the public, resonate with slave trickster tales. Most obviously pertinent of these is the Old Master and John cycle of stories, where John is "a talented and skillful exploiter of his exploitation by Old Master, his dupe or foil" (Roberts 53). In most of the tales, John claims a special talent or superhuman ability—something more than labor—that Old Master seeks to exploit, and John negotiates the situation to his own benefit, oftentimes playing off the slavery system's customs. These tales survived after emancipation, substituting Old Boss for Old Master, and were improvised upon. "Old Riley," a song about a "trusty" convict escaping the mythical prison dog Rattler by walking on water is one example that was in Lead Belly's repertoire. "The Boll Weevil" is another song Lead Belly performed that reached back to slavery animal trickster tales by treating the boll weevil as a disruptive trickster that secures itself food and a home no matter the conditions.

The boll weevil is distinctly a post-emancipation trickster, and its situation reflects the social and economic conditions free African Americans faced. While the ballad was created as a response to the boll weevil's devastation of crops throughout the South that began at the turn of the century and escalated into the 1920s, the story of the boll weevil became symbolic for African Americans struggling to establish a place in the South. The weevil represented the social outlaw, "a hobo, a train-hopper, a river jumper," as Alan Lomax explains in his introduction to a Lead Belly recording of the song. "Like the Negro, [the weevil] was hard to hold down, and when things got too bad, he moved on into new country. Negroes in Texas made up this story into a song . . . Sharecroppers, dispossessed farmers, and drifting workers liked it" ("Negro Sinful Songs" 5). Treated as a plague by society, the placeless social outlaw justifies his actions by claiming that he's looking for a home. Lead Belly assumes the trickster's role by aligning himself with the boll weevil in a 1939 recording of the song for his *Negro Sinful Songs* record collection:

If anybody should come along and ask you, good people,  
Who composed this song,  
Tell 'em it Huddie Ledbetter,  
He's done been here an' gone,  
He's a-lookin' for a home.

While "The Boll Weevil" implicitly critiques African American social standing in the South during this time by improvising on slave trickster tradition, Lead Belly would

begin writing and performing more explicit socially conscious songs after his separation from John Lomax and during his association with the Left.

### Sinful Songs and the Socially Conscious Bad Man

The publication of the Lomaxes' *Negro Folks Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* in 1936 capped the whirlwind months Lead Belly and the Lomaxes spent together and cemented the minstrel/badman public mythology that was built in that short time. While the book marked an end, Lead Belly was struggling to move forward, partly by trying to capitalize on the publicity he received a year earlier. After spending most of the previous year in Dallas—during which time he hired lawyers to negotiate with John Lomax for money he thought he was owed, was unemployed until late November when he got a job as a service station attendant, and ended up writing letters to Lomax proposing a renewal of their partnership, but to no avail—Lead Belly moved to New York City to continue his performing career. The *Herald Tribune* wrote another article about Lead Belly when he arrived in 1936, written in the same tone as the previous year, describing him as “the rhyming, knife-toting, string-plucking, toe-tapping Negro minstrel from the Louisiana swamplands” (Robinson and Reynolds 44). Without Lomax, however, Lead Belly and his new manager, John W. Townsend, who was the manager at the service station, found it difficult to make the right contacts, but news of his return did get him some engagements. One, an extended run (31 performances a week) at the Lafayette Theater



in Harlem, featured Lead Belly wearing prison garb and re-enacting his plea to Governor Neff. In April, he headlined a 65-member revue with two chorus lines and Willie “The Lion” Smith’s jazz band at the newly-opened Apollo Theater, which was a failure. It was soon apparent that Lead Belly’s minstrel/badman performance persona had run its course, and he needed to find a new audience.

In 1937 there was a distinct transformation of Lead Belly’s public persona even though he never completely shed the bad man image. The April 19 *Life* article, “LEAD BELLY: BAD NIGGER MAKES GOOD MINSTREL,” sounded the familiar rhetoric of the past two years: “The easiest way to avoid or at least mitigate the consequences of sin is to entertain your fellow man. Amuse the public, and you can get away with almost any crime. Prime example of the great American appreciation of criminal talent is the case of Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly” (39). Accompanying the article is a large picture of Lead Belly—barefooted in overalls with his twelve-string and singing while seated upon a pile of full sacks—a smaller picture of his wife, who is identified as his manager as well, and below Martha’s picture, a close-up of Lead Belly’s hands playing guitar with the caption: “THESE HANDS ONCE KILLED A MAN.” The almost disturbingly playful ambiguity of this rhetoric starkly demonstrates American popular culture minstrelizing itself and its fascination with the outlaw figure, but for Lead Belly it was the same old story.

Four months later, a much different depiction of Lead Belly appeared in the *Daily Worker* under the headline, “Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People.” The striking contrast in tone between this

headline and *Life*'s makes it seem as if the articles are about two different people. In a way, they are, speaking in terms of his performance persona. In the *Daily Worker* article he's referred to by his real name in the title. In fact, Huddie Ledbetter is only referred to as Lead Belly once in the entire article, as if the minstrel mask is lifted to reveal the "Negro Folk Artist." There's no minstrelsy in the depiction of Huddie's performance, but rather an artist who sings the songs of his people: "When 50-year-old Huddie Ledbetter planks himself in a chair and spreads his feet and starts strumming his 12-string guitar and singing that rich, barrel-chested baritone, it seems that the entire folk culture of the American Negro has found its embodiment in him" (Wright, "Huddie Ledbetter" 7). The accompanying images punctuate his professional artistry. There's a picture of Huddie playing guitar and singing with his head tilted back and mouth open, which is almost the same singing pose as the picture accompanying the *Life* article, but in this photo he's wearing a dress shirt and tie. The other image is a musical transcription of "The Scottsboro Boys Got Here," a song Ledbetter composed less than a week earlier after hearing a radio broadcast of the celebration held for four of the Scottsboro Boys who were finally released. In addition to these transformations of his image, there's also the conspicuous difference of news coverage. The *Daily Worker* was, after all, the east coast mouthpiece of the Communist Party USA.

This coverage had a lot to do with the new audiences and sponsors Lead Belly found in the Left, but the Huddie Ledbetter, his history and the cultural performative force of his music, found in the article is also the archetype of a man the author Richard Wright had been drawn to his entire life and would present as a case study in *Native Son*

three years later. The representative bad man in the novel, Bigger Thomas, developed from Wright's own experiences and the many versions of Bigger he met in life. As a child, the first version was most like the archetypal bad man whose freedom, violence, and power was acted out in the black community, and Wright was often a victim of this "bully": "His life was a continuous challenge to others. At all times he *took* his way, right or wrong, and those who contradicted him had him to fight" ("How 'Bigger'" 435). This Bigger left a "marked impression" on Wright because of the apprehensive respect the bad man elicited from the black community: "maybe it was because I longed secretly to be like him and was afraid" ("How 'Bigger'" 435). As Wright grew older the Biggers he encountered directed their "hardness" "toward the whites that ruled the South," one version of which was the white-labeled "bad nigger," who flouted white authority with every act ("How 'Bigger'" 435). All of the versions of Bigger that Wright encountered were the only blacks he knew of "who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price" ("How 'Bigger'" 437). Socially, Bigger was an embodiment of Poor Boy, "hovering unwanted between two worlds—between powerful America and his own stunted place in life," precariously existing in a liminal "No Man's Land," outlaw territory ("How 'Bigger'" 451). Wright must have seen some of Bigger in Huddie Ledbetter, but with an important difference. The Biggers he'd met, their acts, were pure reaction to social forces, exerting their agency individually because they'd lost their connection to black religious and folk

communities. Huddie, on the other hand, was steeped in the folk community, the voice of his people, making him a socially conscious bad man.

Wright moved to New York City in the summer of 1937 and befriended Huddie soon after. While Wright's article certainly seems to be a rebuke to the *Life* story, it's more generally a rebuke to the entire Lead Belly myth of the previous years. Wright's rehashing of the Lomax/Lead Belly relationship inverts the characterization of the tale as a discovery and preservation of a national treasure into cultural theft: "one of the most amazing cultural swindles in American history," perpetrated by Lomax as the government's agent and representative of the "Southern landlords [who] exploited [Ledbetter], robbed him of his self-made culture and then turned him loose on the streets of Northern cities to starve" ("Huddie Ledbetter" 7). For Wright, the story was symptomatic of America's treatment of blacks. Ledbetter's entire performance represented the voice of the black man amidst exploitive, exclusionary, and punitive forces: "Shaped and moulded by some of the harshest social forces in American Life, Ledbetter admits that he knows 500 folk songs" (Wright, "Huddie Ledbetter" 7). Within the context of this rhetorical tone, Huddie's criminal history, which was sensationalized in earlier press, became a result of victimization. In Wright's version, he was incarcerated "for protecting himself against the aggression of Southern whites"—perhaps true of his jail sentence in Louisiana, but not true in the case of killing Will Stafford ("Huddie Ledbetter" 7). Like versions of Bigger he'd met, Ledbetter posed a threat to white social order:

Down South the white landlords called him a “bad nigger” and they were afraid of his fists, his bitter, biting songs, his 12-stringed guitar, and his inability to take injustice and like it. Because they feared him and respected his hardness they called him “Lead Belly.” And at the first opportunity that came their way they threw him in jail. (“Huddie Ledbetter” 7)

Wright perhaps inadvertently calls attention to the bad man’s, and thus the outlaw’s, cultural force across racial lines, citing both white fear and respect of Lead Belly, an ambiguity prominent in John Henry’s story. It’s also important to note that Wright equates “bad nigger” with “Lead Belly” by use of quotation marks, not only suggesting that Huddie’s performance persona was created by whites, but also aligning Lead Belly with the black bad man archetype, whether it be the moral hard man or the criminal hard man. In this characterization of his performance persona, Wright marks a new mythologizing of Huddie Ledbetter that operates similar to his minstrelization, transforming him into a stereotypical and idealized spokesman, the black bad man that fights white oppression.

The black bad man archetype can be seen as a development and conflation of the slavery trickster and black conjurer, but more attuned to the social and economic conditions faced after emancipation. “The black conjure tradition,” John W. Roberts argues, “especially the belief that the Devil was the source of the conjurer’s power, assumed a central role in the black conception of the bad man as folk hero in the late nineteenth century” (200). This association gave the bad man supernatural powers as well as a powerful position to back up his boasts, what Jerry H. Bryant calls the

“*rhetoric of badness*” found in bad man ballads (11). This is clearly seen in the case of Stagolee. Lead Belly was attuned to this persona, evident in his musical boasts of being the best twelve-string guitarist in the world and knowing over 500 songs, but also in his reaction to a comment made by George Lyman Kittredge, a folklorist and mentor to John Lomax, while Lead Belly was performing at Harvard in 1935. During the performance, Kittredge whispered to Lomax, “He is a demon, Lomax” (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Songs* 62). When Lomax shared the comment with Lead Belly, he responded, “De demon means de head man . . . Dat ol’ man knows whut he is talkin’ about” (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Songs* 62). Again, we can think of Stagolee, especially in versions of his tale where he’s so bad that he even dethrones the devil to become head man in hell. But Lead Belly’s bad man wasn’t so much of the Stagolee type, not a boaster versed in the rhetoric of badness. In fact, there’s no record of him ever singing about Stagolee. The bad men he sang about more often overtly challenged traditional structures and their violent acts were an interracial concern rather than occurring strictly within the black community.

It’s telling that when the Lomaxes first met Lead Belly at Angola he told them that his favorite ballad was “Po’ Lazarus.” The ballad recounts the search, capture, and slaying of the bad man, carrying out the High Sheriff’s order to bring the outlaw back “dead or alive” (A. Lomax, “‘Sinful’ Songs” 27). According to Lead Belly, Lazarus was a levee worker who tended the livestock. One day he got fed up with the work conditions, so he carried his .44 Colt into the mess hall while everyone was eating and

got up on de table an' went a walkin' down de middle, trompin' inter all de food wid his muddy, manure shoes. When he git to odder en' table, he turn aroun' an' play wid he guns an' say, "Ef any you boys think you got yo' feelin's hu't, come on up here an' I'll try to pacify yo' min'." . . . he go over to do' pay-car and ask for he pay. De clerk, he gives him a li'l ole measly paycheck an' Laz'us say, "What 'bout all dat back-pay you cheat me out of?" An he reach in de winder, knock de clerk in de head, an' take all de money an' lit out. Well, dat where de ballit take up. (A. Lomax, "'Sinful' Songs" 26-7)

Lead Belly's contextualizing and explaining songs became a characteristic element of his performance soon after he was released from Angola. Like the background story he gives to "Poor Howard," the information gives deeper resonance to the tradition and social conditions the songs emerged from, making it clear why, as Lead Belly notes, workers or prisoners would sing the song when they got mad at the captain.

Thus, Lead Belly's prototypical bad man was not Stagolee, but a trickster like old Riley or Po' Lazurus. "Duncan and Brady," another bad man ballad he performed, while not such an overt protest, still challenges white authority's right to disrupt a privileged space. After shooting Brady, the white sheriff, Duncan admonishes him:

Brady, Brady, Brady, you know you done wrong,  
Walkin' in the room when the game was goin' on,  
Knocking down windows, breakin' down the door,  
Now you lyin' dead on the grocery floor. (*The Leadbelly Songbook* 74)

Duncan's act is justified by Brady's intrusion. The song can be seen as an inversion of the many prison songs Lead Belly performed, springing from an environment that obviously restricted the rights and freedom of prisoners. Here, the deadly restriction is enforced against white law.

Unlike the stereotypical bad man, however, Lead Belly's version is not free to do anything he pleases. In his ballad version of an incident that occurred in Dallas where Bill Martin murdered Ella Speed, his wife or girlfriend, Lead Belly interjects: "I tell all the boys: 'Don' kill no women. You might do aroun' an' you might kill a man; but please don't kill no women. They put you under de pen'" (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Songs* 189). Killing a woman would surely result in a stiff prison sentence, even death, but the act of violence toward a close relation, or the community for that matter, soberly resonates with Poor Boy's disconnectedness from any sense of home, as Lead Belly expresses in a metaphor that deftly expresses Poor Boy's existence:

Bill Martin sat down to play cooncan,

Po' boy couldn' half play his han',

Thinkin' 'bout de woman that he murdered,

Had gone away to some far, distant lan'. (Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Songs* 191)

Because of his violent act, Martin exiles himself, making it even more difficult to play the hand he was dealt in life.

By the time Wright met him, Lead Belly was indeed writing more socially conscious songs that directly addressed the hand dealt to blacks in American society, which was, in part, due to his new audience. He wrote a number of songs criticizing Jim



Crow laws and began incorporating some of the same terminology used by Leftists like Wright, Alan Lomax, and Mary Barnicle, a professor at New York University who became one of his chief supporters. A more polished version of the Scottsboro Boys song that Wright included in his article distinctly uses “landlord,” like Wright, to describe white Southern oppressors in the chorus:

Go to Alabama and you better watch out

The landlord will get you,

Gonna jump and shout,

Scottsboro, Scottsboro, Scottsboro Boys

They can tell you what it’s all about (*The Library of Congress Recordings*)

Lead Belly warns northern blacks, those living in Harlem and Sugar Hill, even Joe Louis, not to venture down south, using the Scottsboro Boys as an example of Southern oppression. Also, the use of “landlord” further emphasizes placelessness, inability to settle one’s own home, contrasted with the thriving black northern communities of Harlem and Sugar Hill and a black figure who could fight his way to prominence in American culture.

“The Bourgeois Blues,” another song included in Wright’s article, addresses the troubling segregation in the nation’s capital, damningly juxtaposing Washington with the Jim Crow South. Because the lyrics accompany the article, the implication that it serves as a rebuke to earlier press and Lead Belly’s minstrelization is emphasized further with Lead Belly critiquing the minstrel performance that resulted in his music being housed with the Declaration of Independence: “Them rich white folks in Washington / They

sure know how / To throw you a nickel to see you bow” (Wright, “Huddie Ledbetter” 7). The song also references a moment when Lead Belly also played the role of the moral hard man, as Pete Seeger characterizes the force of this role: “The fact that Lead Belly stood up for his rights frightened white people. It frightened black people, too. When Lead Belly came into prominence and sang in Washington, D.C., he was ostracized by blacks because he wasn’t the type of ‘colored’ person they wanted to represent the race. They would have nothing to do with a barroom gambler, ex-con and a murderer” (Robinson and Reynolds 131). The song sprung from an incident when Huddie and his wife visited Alan Lomax in Washington to record for the Library of Congress in June 1937. The Ledbetters were denied lodging in a number of places, including Lomax’s apartment because the landlord wouldn’t allow it and black-owned lodging because they were with white people. The mixed group couldn’t even find a place to eat. Mary Barnicle, who’d driven the Ledbetters to D.C., was exasperated, and those riding with her jokingly referred to Washington as a bourgeois town: “Huddie perked up. He didn’t know what the word *bourgeois* meant, but his poet’s ear loved the sound of it. When he asked Barnicle what it meant, and after she explained it, he was even more interested in the word” (Wolfe and Lornell 206). The result was an ironic Poor Boy’s critique that even in the nation’s capital he was a long ways from home, made even more ironic by the fact that the man singing it had been deemed a national treasure.

I want all the colored people,

To listen to me.

Don't ever try to get no home,

In Washington, DC.

'Cause it's a bourgeois town,

Ooh, it's a bourgeois town.

I got the bourgeois blues,

I'm sure gonna spread the news. (*The Library of Congress Recordings*)

### Lead Belly Is a Hard Name

Even though he began writing more socially conscious and topical songs (such as “The Roosevelt Song,” “The Hindenburg Disaster,” “Jean Harlow,” and “Howard Hughes”), Lead Belly never involved himself in the politics of his new audience. The most explicit of these songs addressed Civil Rights, which was obviously an issue Lead Belly didn’t need any political beliefs to support. Frederic Ramsey argues that Lead Belly “could find no real place for himself in New York’s musical, political, or social worlds” (Cantwell, *When We Were Good* 74). He constantly struggled financially and played to the audiences that would support him, but was never a great success except in musical and radical circles.

One of the great contradictions of Lead Belly’s minstrel/badman persona was the gentleness and generosity he exhibited, confounding many later acquaintances in respect to the incongruity of the violence of his early years. Pete Seeger mused that he “always figured that here was a clear example of what naturally brings otherwise gentle people

into violence. Those little southern honkytonks were and still are known for fights and killings. And southern prison farms to which Negroes are sent are murderous places” (*The Leadbelly Songbook* 7). Most significantly, Lead Belly’s gentleness was exhibited while entertaining children, who seemed to be his favorite audience and kids were enthralled, clapping and dancing, while he played. This interaction, however, suggests something more than Lead Belly’s gentle streak. At these performative moments, Lead Belly was simply an entertainer, and that’s all the kids expected out of him. He didn’t have to play the minstrel or the bad man.

As a number of friends and fellow performers, like Pete Seeger, have pointed out, Lead Belly was an “honest” performer. Seeger learned from Huddie “the straight-forward approach, the direct honesty” (*The Leadbelly Songbook* 7). No matter the audience he was playing to, he was always uniquely himself. When Seeger first met Lead Belly, he was trying to shed his Harvard upbringing and affect a workingman persona in accordance with his political beliefs. “But Leadbelly,” says Seeger, “always had a clean white shirt and starched collar, well-pressed suit and shined shoes. He didn’t need to affect that he was a workingman. His powerful ringing voice, and his muscular hands moving like a dancer over the strings of his huge twelve-stringed guitar, his honesty and pride, showed he was a workingman” (*The Leadbelly Songbook* 7). Alan Lomax seconds this sentiment: “Lead Belly was the performer everyone thought of when they wanted honesty, authenticity and power” (Reynolds and Robinson 13). These descriptions of Lead Belly’s performance persona and his noticeable preference for young audiences mark the final transformation of Huddie Ledbetter that perhaps reaches

back to when he was playing country dances as a young teen, shedding the minstrel and being recognized as a professional and honest folk artist: a reputation bolstered by The Weavers' multimillion-selling cover of "Irene" less than a year after his death, soon followed by more covers by artists such as Frank Sinatra and Ernest Tubb.

Even though he never enjoyed popular and financial success in life, Lead Belly's legacy exerted great influence, crossing the color line he openly criticized; he was Poor Howard playing for all. In "LEADBELLY is a hard name," Woody Guthrie, perhaps inadvertently, echoes Lead Belly's story of Poor Howard while musing on Lead Belly's performative force:

I went with Leadbelly to all kinds of places where he performed, in your school, church, your theater, your radio studio, at your cocktail club, and at your outdoor rally to call you to come together to meet . . . I saw you make just as much of an applause for Leadbelly as for your other leaders, and the thing you applauded in him was pure personal fighting power. The same power as the prisoner of War that cries and sings, dances, after he is freed from a death camp. (9)

But even though Guthrie shapes his vision of Lead Belly into his own distinct view of performance, he gets to the core of Lead Belly's outlaw performance persona: "The sight and the feel of his music box in his hands lit up those homeless stretches of his spirit and he said, This is my way" ("Hard Name" 10).

CHAPTER V

PERFORMING THE OUTLAW: WOODY GUTHRIE, THE DUSTIEST OF THE  
DUST BOWLERS

Nobody living can ever stop me,  
As I go walking that freedom highway;  
Nobody living can ever make me turn back,  
This land was made for you and me.

— Woody Guthrie “This Land Is Your Land” (*Every 100 Years* 97)

I ain’t got no home,  
I’m just a-roamin’ ‘round,  
Just a wand’rin’ worker, I go from town to town.  
And the police make it hard  
Wherever I may go,  
And I ain’t got no home in this world anymore.

— Woody Guthrie “I Ain’t Got No Home” (*The Woody Guthrie  
Songbook* 137-38)

“Why are you so damned interested in Woody Guthrie? The man’s been out of commission for years. Why is he so important to you?” Lee Hays asked a young waiter who was hounding Hays for details about his former roommate and sometime

performing partner (Klein 440). It was the late 1950s, and the folk revival was gathering popular and cultural force with a generation that was lucky enough not to have experienced the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, labor strife, and America's escalating involvement in WWII, the historical and social realities that were foundational to Guthrie's performance persona and work. By this time, Guthrie was indeed out of commission; residing at Greystone Park, a psychiatric hospital in New Jersey, suffering from Huntington's Disease. He had trouble lighting a cigarette, could no longer play guitar, and involuntary spastic motion made it impossible for him to even write a letter. By the time he died in 1967, he hadn't been able to talk for years.

Nevertheless, the young waiter had a strong perception of who Guthrie was, at least in his own mind: "Most kids reach a point where they really want their freedom. You hate school, your parents—anything that stands in the way. All you can think about is getting *out*. You want to hitch a ride, hop a freight, go wherever you want. Woody, I guess, represents that kind of freedom for me" (Klein 440). Clearly, this young waiter latched onto the aspects of Guthrie's performance persona that spoke to his own historical and social realities, his response sounding stereotypical of the post-WWII, alienated youth voice. Hays was perplexed. Visiting Washington Square Park, the hub of folk revival activity in Greenwich Village, he sought answers, asking the young performers, "Who was Woody Guthrie?" (Klein 441) The answers he got make Guthrie seem like Jay Gatsby, another American dreamer and outlaw whose party guests could only speculate about his past: "He was a rich rancher's son who ran away"; "sailed a boat to Alaska"; "killed a man"; "died of syphilis"; "he's out there somewhere, riding

boxcars” (Klein 441). There’s actually a shade of truth in all of these statements: his father was somewhat wealthy for the first ten years of Guthrie’s life; he sailed across the Atlantic as a Merchant Marine during WWII; he claimed his guitar killed fascists; he wrote songs about STDs, even recording a skit about syphilis for the U.S. Department of Health; and he rode many a boxcar in his life. But the mystery for Hays was how the kids even knew who Guthrie was since his autobiography was out of print and his records never sold well. As Joe Klein notes, “[I]t was the Guthrie spirit, as much as anything else, that was fueling the wild resurgence of folk music sweeping the country” (441). Clearly evident in Hays’ anecdote, the foundation of Guthrie’s spirit, rather than just the social realities he had faced, was an outlaw persona that represented a sense of freedom which ran counter to settled, quotidian life. While initially the post-WWII generation interpreted this sense of freedom as an escape from the responsibilities and social mores of their parents’ generation, Guthrie and the like-minded of his generation treated this sense of freedom in positive terms, as a social responsibility and promise that every citizen had the right to work, eat, and live on equal terms. Both of these interpretations of freedom, the negative and the positive, however, are responses to oppressive cultural and social forces of mainstream America, and in the early 1960s, many revivalists would also incorporate a sense of social responsibility.

In the late 1930s, when Woody Guthrie began publicly cultivating his outlaw persona over the air on KFVD in Los Angeles and performing for migrant workers and labor causes, the “good man” version of the outlaw was a dominant cultural figure, no doubt a cultural response to the harsh economic conditions of the Great Depression,



particularly in the Midwest, Southwest, and Great Plains, where the Dust Bowl made these conditions even worse. Jesse James and Billy the Kid were revolting against bankers and land barons on behalf of the people on the silver screen, bank robber Pretty Boy Floyd (shot down in 1934) was given the Robin Hood treatment in the popular press and imagination, and John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde (all also gunned down in 1934 by authorities), though not treated in distinctly “good man” terms, were cultural celebrities. Like his friend Huddie Ledbetter, Woody Guthrie came from an outlaw background, a culture where the perspicuous presence of the outlaw was a part of everyday life. Guthrie’s classic outlaws were unmistakably populist heroes, however, the kind that had deep cultural impact in Oklahoma when he was growing up.

In Okemah, Oklahoma, where he was born in 1912, Guthrie tells Alan Lomax that people talked about Jesse James “almost like he was one of the family” (*Library of Congress* Disc 2 Track 2). It’s no surprise that the regional mythologizing of Pretty Boy Floyd, who spent his youth in Oklahoma, was constructed much in the same way as James. He had such a cultural impact that Guthrie went so far as “to venture to say without stretchin’ the truth that Pretty Boy Floyd is sung about on more lips and more mouths and thought better of in more hearts; he’s all around more popular than any governor that Oklahoma ever had” (*Library of Congress* Disc 2 Track 2). But while Guthrie and the contemporary culture posed the good man outlaw as a figure to critique and challenge mainstream American society, Guthrie expanded upon this practice. He improvised on the classic good man outlaw to include distinctly social outlaws such as Tom Joad, Jesus Christ, and Harriet Tubman, making a more definite and clearer

connection between the social issues of his time and the performative, disruptive force of the outlaw.

In the process of creating social outlaws from the tradition of classic outlaws, Guthrie also cultivated his outlaw role, creating and performing a mythology of a rambling folk singer that could serve as a spokesman for the people. Guthrie's ideal outlaw for the times was not a man who took a six shooter in hand, but an outlaw figure armed with a guitar uniting the collective strength of the people. For Guthrie, it was the communal tradition of folk song and the act of singing that render the outlaw performer and subject as an agent for freedom and social change. In a 1940 letter to Alan Lomax, Guthrie elaborates on his perception of folk music's performative force:

I think real folk stuff scares most of the guys in Washington. A folk song is whats wrong and how to fix it or it could be whose hungry and where their mouth is or whose out of work and where the job is or whose broke and where the money is or whose carrying a gun and where the peace is—that's folk lore and folks made it up because they seen that politicians couldn't find nothing to fix or nobody to feed or give a job of work. (*Pastures of Plenty* 50)<sup>33</sup>

For the man who thought music had such cultural force that he painted on his guitar "This Machine Kills Fascists," "music is a weapon, the same as a gun, and can be used by the slave just the same as the big boss" (*Pastures of Plenty* 83). Surely that sentiment

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<sup>33</sup> Woody Guthrie often assumes a folksy and/or playful voice in his writings, peppering them with misspellings and wordplay. Because of this I have preserved the grammar and spelling in all quotations from Guthrie.

and spirit carried into the 50s and 60s distinctly with Civil Rights struggles and Vietnam War protest (*Pastures of Plenty* 83).

As we've seen with the outlaw figure throughout this study, there's a complex ambivalence in Guthrie's persona. While he espoused unionism of every kind (a concept he applied to society in general), personally, he was more of a loner, a fierce individualist who could not settle for any period of time in any place or job no matter how lucrative, without giving over to his restless impulse. Even in his musical performances we can hear a sort of non-committal restlessness—taking it easy, but taking it, as one of his favorite sayings went. Hence, a lot of truth lay in the young waiter's assessment of Guthrie's spirit. It's this ambivalence, however, that gives Guthrie's performance force. His message could often be overly didactic, couched with dry humor or sometimes even intense hatred, but his fierce individualism augmented this position; his outlaw persona backed the message with the cultural force it needed. And it's this ambivalence that can result in making a "national possession, like Yellowstone or Yosemite, and a part of the best stuff this country has to show the world" out of a radical (Fadiman 68).

There's been much excellent critical attention to Guthrie's life and work, particularly in the last two decades. Biographies by Joe Klein (1980) and Ed Cray (2004) have complicated Guthrie's place in the popular imagination while also paradoxically cementing Guthrie's canonization. Critical studies devoted to Guthrie's work by Mark Allan Jackson (2007) and Martin Butler (2007) and a collection of essays edited by John Partington (2011) have likewise challenged and expanded upon conventional readings of

Guthrie's work. In Bryan K. Garman's *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (2000), Guthrie is examined within the scope of Whitman's ideal working-class hero as following in the tradition of his democratic, but radical, singer. Will Kaufman's *Woody Guthrie: An American Radical* (2011) goes even further to emphasize Guthrie's radical history in an effort, like all of these recent works, to recover his political radicalism subsumed in the popular treatment of Guthrie as a national possession:

Woody Guthrie spent his productive life on the warpath—against poverty, political oppression, censorship, capitalism, fascism, racism, and, ultimately, war itself. His commitment to radical struggle forced him to face head-on—and sometimes celebrate—the violence inevitable to the tearing down and reconstruction of an oppressive system. (XXV)

At this point, it seems as if ever since the 1960s, about the time the “radical” verses of “This Land Is Your Land” were recovered, Guthrie advocates have been trying to recover his radicalism, and through these works it's no longer in danger of being forgotten. This chapter is more concerned with how Guthrie improvised upon the good man outlaw tradition as a way to perform his radicalism.

## The Great, Singing Historical Bum in the Garden of Eden

Lead Belly, Guthrie wrote in 1947, “wanted to preach history, his own history, his peoples story, and everybody’s history. He wanted to be all kinds of big names, a history speaker, a story teller” (*American Folksong* 10). Guthrie’s idealization of his friend is very much what Guthrie aspired to be as a performer, and he imagines a similar sort of performer in his memorable foray into tall tale bragging, “Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done (The Great Historical Bum).” It’s hard to tell just how tongue-in-cheek the song is supposed to be. The boaster’s unrelenting optimism adds accomplishment upon accomplishment to the list of the greatest things man has ever done: he built the rock of ages, “signed the contract to raise the sun,” defeated the Romans, Turks, and Nero’s army, won the American Revolution, the “slavery war” and has his sights on Hitler next (*The Nearly Complete Collection of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs* 26-7). The enumerations pile on top of each other and seem like they might go on forever, each accomplishment, implied by the refrain of each verse, topping those previous. Some of them *are* great accomplishments, like ending slavery and defeating Fascism, but some of the boasts are surely problematic. For instance, the Great Historical Bum served as “straw boss on the Pyramids, the Tower of Babel, too,” both great feats of engineering but at the cost of slave labor, which the straw boss would have been in charge of, and misguided pride, as the biblical tale warns (26). In the next line, however, he claims to have parted the Red Sea, letting “the migrant children through,”

the very slave labor that built pyramids, and Guthrie makes a telling distinction in calling them migrants.

Certainly Guthrie wasn't blind to these contradictions, and his placement of a social outlaw in the role of the people's herald serves as a wry critique of dominant mythical and historical narratives. Guthrie's representative man in this narrative is unapologetically honest about his flaws, his tongue-in-cheek optimism accepts his faults as a part of the human condition, which is humorously suggested in his implied expulsion from Eden and the cost of original sin: "I worked in the Garden of Eden, that was the year of two, / Joined the apple pickers union, I always paid my due" (26). These lines succinctly summarize Guthrie's outlaw performance persona, casting his lot with the outlawed, dispossessed, and unsettled, emphasizing a need for solidarity or union among the outcasts, and paying his dues, which were his songs, committed to giving voice to his people—all with a touch of humor, the reference to apple pickers in Eden. And Guthrie could and did cut the figure of the lonesome traveler, his prototypical bum, the "Dustiest of the Dust Bowlers" as his KFVD business card read.

More than a decade before the phrase "Dust Bowl" was coined and the term "Okie" took on such negative social, cultural, economic, and genetic connotations, making it sound more like a racial epithet rather than a regional indicator, Woody Guthrie and his family, as he told Alan Lomax in 1940, weren't "in that class that John Steinbeck called the Okies" (*Library of Congress Recordings* Disc 1 Track 5). His father, Charlie, was a prominent figure and real estate dealer in Okemah, worth close to \$40,000 by Guthrie's estimation. By the time Guthrie was ten, however, his father had

lost everything. But something unsettling existed beneath the surface of their prosperous life before the loss, even before Guthrie was born, ever since his family's new six-room home went up in flames in 1909, only a month after it was built. Another home was destroyed by a cyclone. Guthrie's fourteen-year-old sister, Cathy, was burnt to death in 1919, and his mother's increasingly erratic mood and behavior elicited a suspicion that she was somehow responsible. Guthrie witnessed a distinct change in his mother, seeing and hearing it in the way she sang: "She commenced to sing the sadder songs in a loster voice, to gaze out our window and to follow her songs out and up and over and away from it all, away over yonder in the minor keys" (*American Folksong* 2). Nora Guthrie was always singing to her children and telling them stories about the old ballads, and as musically inclined as Guthrie was, his mother's "loster" voice must not only have troubled him, but also amplified the unsettling mood of many of the songs she sang, particularly the "hurt songs . . . [she sang] in a wilder way" (*American Folksong* 2).

"Pictures from Life's other Side," a late nineteenth century sentimental ballad of murder, gambling, and suicide that Nora Guthrie often sang, left a deep impression on the young Guthrie. It can serve as a structural and thematic template for Guthrie's work and resonates with what he took from his mother's singing and stories: "in her own way she told us over and over to always try and see the world from the other fellow's side" (*Bound for Glory* 39). Woody would soon get a good look at that other side as his mother's health—Huntington's Disease would be the diagnosis—and the family's life rapidly unraveled. He would make a life of trying to portray life's other side in his work, as he told Alan Lomax in 1940: "All I know how to do Alan is to just keep a plowing

right on down the avenue watching what I can see and listening to what I can hear and trying to learn about everybody I meet everyday and try to make one part of the community feel like they know the other part and one end of it help the other end” (*Pastures of Plenty* 51). Rather than just picturing life’s other side, however, Guthrie’s outlaw impulse is to eradicate the whole concept of sides by dismissing the lines and laws that separate one side from the other. This is the job, Guthrie wrote in 1946, of the outlaw performer, the ballad singer who “walks across political lines, color lines, conventional and superstitious lines, the lines of jealousy and blind hate ... reaches a place in every person that no other sort of person can reach” (*Born to Win* 122). But comments like these came from a Woody Guthrie who was already fully invested in his “Dustiest of the Dustbowlers” performance role and was self-consciously “theorizing” about folk music, no doubt a result of his meeting Alan Lomax.

In 1936, a year before Guthrie first arrived in California, Los Angeles police chief James Edgar Davis set up a blockade at the California-Arizona border to prevent undesirable migrants from entering the state. The measure was one of many that sought to marginalize and oppress migrants fleeing the Dust Bowl and general economic conditions of the Great Depression for the dream of opportunity in California. Native Californians saw the mass influx of poor, jobless individuals and families as a threat. “In the first few years after the exodus began,” Peter La Chapelle notes, “Okies were subject to a well-organized media scapegoating campaign that portrayed migrants as threatening folk devils. Media attacks not only stirred up moral panic about Okie intentions but also persuaded California authorities and legislators to pursue restrictive and discriminatory



measures” (8). “Okies,” a general slur used to describe poor migrants wherever they came from, were treated like social outlaws and not just as tramps or hoboes, but in racial terms as well. For instance, a movie theater in the San Joaquin Valley displayed a sign ordering “Negroes and Okies upstairs” (McWilliams 116). And as in the tramp scare of the late nineteenth century, migrants were pathologized. The popularity of eugenics in California added a genetic perspective on this pathology, suggesting that Okies came from poor hereditary stock. Yet, as Guthrie notes, native Californians “admitted themselves . . . that they needed people to [pick their crops] but at the same time they looked down, for some reason or other, on the people that come in from other states to do that kind of work” (*Library of Congress* Disc 3 Track 6). Thus, migrants were treated somewhat ambivalently, like the outlaw figure, in general, existing as territorial inhabitants rather than full-fledged citizens.

The migrant experience ran counter to mythical tales of the American Dream and the West as a place of promise. As Martin Butler argues, “The dream of roaming free across the country suddenly turned into a horrible nightmare of expulsion and enforced migration during the Great Depression” (“Always On the Go” 92). The idea that romantic expedition became a necessity just to survive wasn’t enough to destroy the dream. Migrants did, after all, look west with hope, to California as a Garden of Eden, when they couldn’t see through the black dust of the storms or their tractors buried under sand. But a double expulsion and/or marginalization from their homes and hoped-for new homes left them with nothing but a marginal placelessness. This shared placelessness, however, could also be a position from which disruptive acts could

challenge the social and economic status quo. While some migrants clearly became defensive and asserted their whiteness as prerequisite to equal citizenship and to distance themselves from traditionally oppressed races, Peter La Chappelle argues, “Others embraced the liminal whiteness that beset them, seeing in it a chance to turn outrage into a productive civic populism, and marginalization into an excuse for testing cultural interaction and even political alliances with other marginal ethnic, cultural, and racial groups” (44). Likewise, the mobility of migrants, which could be viewed negatively because of their placelessness, could also be viewed positively, much like positive treatments of the hobo figure who “epitomized an alternative concept of mobility at the time when the idea of continuously moving westwards was seriously put to the test and functioned as an icon of protest and resistance” (Butler, “Always On the Go” 86).

Woody Guthrie combines American myth, civic populism, and a “*narrative of mobility*” in his performance and models of the outlaw, a Great Historical Bum (Butler, “Always On the Go” 86). Unfortunately, the Great Historical Bum wasn’t present at the time of the California blockade to make way for the migrant children, but in 1937 Guthrie wrote “Do Re Mi” to critique the unconstitutional and sacrilegious (to the American Dream) act, finding a welcoming radio audience of the same people that might have been denied access to California. As he would do in countless songs that followed, Guthrie inverts myth and law. “California is a Garden of Eden, / It’s a paradise to live in or see, / But believe it or not, / You won’t find it so hot / If you ain’t got the Do Re Mi” (*The Woody Guthrie Songbook* 67). In these lines the road savvy migrant speaks from the perspective of the California police and governor, the law, in a humorous role

playing that emphasizes the law's treatment of migrants as outlaws—unless they have enough money. Symbolically the law assumes a God-like authority, expelling those who've come to pick fruits from the trees in the Garden. In the context of the song and reality, however, the unconstitutional act reverses the roles. Also, California is demythologized, and Guthrie critiques the very notion of the myth, more of a deception than a dream, as he footnotes on a manuscript of the song: "The California newspapers and magazines print purty pictures and purty descriptions of the Land of Sunshine . . . And they are right in what they print" but they "cause all the fairly happy farm folks to swap their stock and machinery," leaving behind their homes and whatever security they might have had ("If You Ain't Got the Do Re Mi" WGA Song 1, Box 1, Folder 7). But perhaps most troubling to Guthrie about this situation is the attempt to prevent the migrant's or anybody's right to travel anywhere in the country he or she pleases—the vaunted mobility and freedom of the American Dream.

Dust Bowlers and migratory workers in general lived a fundamentally rootless, homeless life, needing to be always on the move from crop to crop, depending on the growing season, or toward some cloudy promise of work. In documenting their plight and performing as their representative, "Guthrie showed that the experience of displacement, movement, homelessness, and transit was not simply a condition but a fundamental fact of American life" (McGovern 117). The thirteen songs Guthrie recorded for *Dust Bowl Ballads* ("Dust Bowl Blues" and "Pretty Boy Floyd" were left off the original release) in 1940 are all about exile, movement, and placelessness; an exhausting inability to settle, as summed up in "I Ain't Got No Home": "I ain't got no

home, I'm just a-ramblin' around / A hard workin' ramblin' man, I go from town to town; / The police make it hard wherever I may go, / And I ain't got no home in this world anymore" (*The Nearly Complete of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs* 35). It's not just that Guthrie was calling attention to the social flaws of the time rather than the flaws of a group of people; he was also critiquing disparities between fundamental American beliefs and the realities of American life. "We'd always been taught to believe that these 48 states was absolutely free country and that anytime anybody took a notion to get up and go anywhere in these 48 states that nobody else in these 48 states would proceed to ask him a whole bunch of questions or to try to keep him from goin' where he started out to go" (*Library of Congress Recordings* Disc 3 Track 6). The implication is that those subject to legal measures preventing their fundamental freedoms were not treated as citizens, but as outlaws who were denied the benefit and protection of the law, including support in obtaining the bare necessities of life. Freedom for the Okies was not some intangible idea, according to Woody's liner notes to *Dust Bowl Ballads*, but a hope for stability found in these hard to come by necessities: "3 square meals a day and a good job at 'honest' pay" (*Pastures of Plenty* 42).

Instead, the migrants were refugees in their own country. Yet, as Guthrie suggests in "Dust Bowl Refugee," they found that the only refuge was enforced and continuing mobility: "Yes we ramble and we roam, / And the highway that's our home, / It's a never ending highway / For a Dust Bowl refugee" (*The Nearly Complete of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs* 74). Here Guthrie casts his lot with his fellow Oklahomans from the perspective of a communal "we," but he's also reclaiming the term "dust bowl refugee,"

which was a cultural slur on par with “Okie” in the negative press, by emphasizing the *community* of people categorized by such a negatively-charged blanket term. And even though the song closes with the narrator wondering if he or she will always be a dust bowl refugee, the previous verse reminds those who call these people refugees that they’re the ones picking the crops, and likens the migrants to a natural force, almost suggesting the threat of biblical retribution: “Yes we wander and we work / In your crops and in your fruit, / Like the whirlwind on the desert / That’s the Dust Bowl Refugee” (74). In 1941, two years after writing the song, Guthrie invoked a similar image of the migrant’s life, again from a communal perspective, in “Pastures of Plenty,” his last specifically Dust Bowl-themed song: “On the edge of your city you’ve seen us and then, / We come with the dust and we go with the wind” (*The Woody Guthrie Songbook* 182). But there’s a difference in these images, a shift of trope reflecting a similar shift in Guthrie’s Dust Bowl persona from simile to metaphor.

Guthrie’s Dust Bowl work culminated in *Dust Bowl Ballads*, recorded after he left Los Angeles for New York City in 1940. All of the songs were written before he came to New York, except for “Vigilante Man” and “Tom Joad,” which was “commissioned” by Victor as part of his recording deal. At this point, Guthrie’s Dustiest of the Dust Bowlers folk outlaw persona shifted from simile—a performer who his audience could recognize as one of their own when he was performing on KFVD—to a metaphoric representative of these people on a larger cultural scale, playing to audiences whose imagination of Okies was greatly influenced by John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and John Ford’s movie adaptation of the novel (1940), for which Guthrie

was an unaccredited music advisor. Guthrie began “acting” the Okie for his new audience. Alan Lomax brought Guthrie down to Washington to record him for the Library of Congress after witnessing Guthrie’s performance at the Grapes of Wrath Benefit concert—where Guthrie would first meet Lomax, Pete Seeger, and Lead Belly—less than a month after his arrival in New York. The Library of Congress recordings give the sense that “[t]his is the actor acting out the role of the folk singer from Oklahoma,” comments Moe Asch, for whom Guthrie would record over one hundred songs in the following years (Logsdon). Smithsonian Archivist Jeff Place seconds this reaction to hearing the Library of Congress recordings. As opposed to his later recordings, they demonstrate Guthrie’s conscious performance of the Okie role: “Woody turned on the professional ‘Okie’ act for Lomax, peppering the introductions with ‘folksy’ language and mannerisms” (“Woody Guthrie’s Recorded Legacy” 58). But in his performance, Guthrie is doing more than just playing the part. He’s also de-stabilizing the negative stereotypes he encountered in California.

In his introductory comments to “Dust Bowl Refugee,” Guthrie turns the phrase back onto those who used it negatively: “there’s more than one kind of a refugee. There’s refugees who take refuge under railroad bridges, and then there’s refugees who take refuge in public office” (*Library of Congress Recordings* Disc 3 Track 5). Furthermore, he’s broadening the implication of such designations, which signals his persona and subject matter shift from simile to metaphor, from a regional to a national, and, with the rise of fascism, a world view, that likewise demonstrates an evolving notion of law that places precedence on moral and natural law, rather than judicial. His

introduction to “The Okie Section” in *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (an anthology compiled by Lomax, annotated by Guthrie, and musically transcribed by Seeger in 1940) reveals a more nationally-minded Guthrie whose early Dust Bowl days only provide a platform for him to critique American society in general: “Almost everybody is a Okie nowadays. That means you ain’t got no home . . . Sort of means, too, you’re out of a job . . . Okies has come to include all of the folks that rich folks has et up” (*Hard Hitting Songs* 213). Later in the introduction, he bluntly admits that he’s gained a larger perspective on the issues he addressed in California: “It looks like this Okie section ought to be my pet section - - but it ain’t. When I first commenced a working on this book, I thought myself it would be” (*Hard Hitting Songs* 213). But Guthrie had seen too much in his travels across the country, and his general political awakening that began in Los Angeles was continuing to develop. He realized that the core issues he sang about in Los Angeles weren’t just applicable to Dust Bowlers, but that, with the current cultural sway of outsider populism and Steinbeck’s portrait of Okies, he could use the Dust Bowler’s experience as a national metaphor.

“This bunch of songs ain’t about me,” Guthrie claims in the liner notes to *Dust Bowl Ballads* (*Pastures of Plenty* 41). He’s still playing his Dustiest of the Dust Bowlers role, the metaphoric, singing Historical Bum, and he makes them about himself in his performance, no matter how much he defers to the plight of his fellow Okies. “These here songs ain’t mine,” he says, but he’s the mouthpiece of the people (*Pastures of Plenty* 45). For Guthrie, songs are the history of the people, their true voice, and as a performer, he becomes their historian. Sounding like Carl Sandburg, most likely

consciously, Guthrie gives singing historic force, a force that can provide answers, as he suggests in “History Singing,” a short essay that is mostly a series of semi-rhetorical questions (because knowing Guthrie, we know the answers). For Guthrie, singing history—the right way—was the most effective way to answers these questions. It’s not the history found in newspapers, but the voice and experience of the people: “I HAVE NEVER HEARD a nation of people sing an editorial out of a paper. A man sings about the little things that help him or hurt his people and he sings of what has got to be done to fix this world like it ought to be. These songs are singing history. History is being sung” (*Ten of Woody Guthrie’s Twenty-Five Cent Songs* 1). In this process, Guthrie, performing the outlaw, invested himself in refiguring the American myths, making his singing history seem like, as Mark Allan Jackson argues, autobiography: “Guthrie becomes as much a part of his songs as his subjects” (*Prophet Singer* 67).

#### The Good Man outside the Law

“I’m a poor lonesome boy, I’m a long way from home, / And I’ll rest my head in a bed on your floor,” sing Guthrie and Cisco Houston in “Bed on the Floor,” a yodeling improvisation on the country blues standard “Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor” (*The Asch Recordings* Disc 2 Track 10). On the recorded version, Guthrie’s poor boy needs a place to rest because the sheriff, “with a big forty four,” is on his trail. It’s not revealed what the poor boy has done, but the allusion to the tale of Po’ Lazarus (the sheriff with



his big forty four was on his trail too) suggests that this poor boy is a bad man outlaw. In a version included in a 1945 mimeographed songbook, additional verses make it clear that this poor boy killed a man. It's still unclear who specifically or why he killed the man, but most likely it was another bad man who was terrorizing the community since poor boy claims "that bully of the town won't bully me no more / 'Cause I laid him dead on the old bar room floor" (*Ten of Woody Guthrie's Twenty-five Cent Songs* 10). In the bad man outlaw tradition "the bully" was someone like Stagolee, who was a menace to the community, and as suggested in songs like "Bully of the Town," killing the bully was a way to take over as head bad man. But this doesn't seem to be the intent in Guthrie's version. There's a sense that poor boy is just another poor boy unable, but longing, to settle down. It's telling that Guthrie chose "bed" instead of "pallet," the former sounding more permanent, home-like, especially alongside the image of the bully lying dead on the old barroom floor. Even in one of the few examples of bad man outlaw figures Guthrie sings about, there's a hint of the good man outlaw that his work favors: "you don't have to turn out to be a bad man to get some changes made" (*Pastures of Plenty* 80).

"I love a good man outside the law just as much as I hate a bad man inside the law," Guthrie comments in a footnote to a later manuscript of "Pretty Boy Floyd" (WGA Song 1, Box 3, Folder 21). Guthrie wasn't the only one who felt this way about outlaws in the 1930s, when the good man, populist outlaw model was culturally pervasive. In 1938, Roy Rogers played the role of a good man version of Billy the Kid in *Billy the Kid Returns*. There's no evidence that Guthrie saw the movie, but the screen portrayal of the

notorious outlaw was similar to Guthrie's view of the outlaw role as a representative rather than merely a criminal who does good deeds. In the beginning of the movie, Billy the Kid (played by Rogers), the criminal, is in a shootout with a gang of ranchers. The Kid had been defending the area's homesteaders against the ranchers' strong arm tactics to run them from the land: a classic good man outlaw model. After the Kid escapes the shootout and kills one of the ranchers, Pat Garrett tracks him down in a barn. He gives the Kid a chance to leave, but the Kid pulls his gun and Garrett is forced to kill him. News of the Kid's death, however, is not made public. The scene then cuts to Roy Rogers (the movie character's name), a former deputy sheriff in Texas, singing as he trots along on Trigger, his horse. A case of mistaken identity ensues, and eventually Rogers is deputized in order to impersonate Billy the Kid and help the homesteaders. Thus, the singing good man becomes representative outlaw. Combine Rogers' role as Billy the Kid with his first leading role earlier that year in *Under Western Stars*, and we have a Hollywood version of Woody Guthrie, accentuating a parallel between the "folk" performer and the cowboy/outlaw figure. In the latter film, Rogers, in order to secure democratic use of water, which is controlled by a water company that exploits Oklahoma ranchers during the days of the Dust Bowl, is elected to congress and sent to Washington, D. C. in order to convince other congressmen to support a bill for federal aid. Rogers, the elected spokesman not only embodies the voice of the folk, but actually sings his plea to congressmen, performing "Dust," a song cataloguing the harsh environment and economic hardship of the region. This is not to say that Guthrie was taking a cue from Roy Rogers in developing his outlaw performance. Guthrie's politics

were far more radical than Rogers' conservative populism during the 1930s, and Rogers' performing style was certainly not the type to which Guthrie aspired.

There were plenty of good man outlaw models that Guthrie could look to in forming the foundation of his outlaw persona and type. There was Robin Hood, whose good man outside the law role was set in distinct contrast to the bad man inside the law, the Sheriff of Nottingham. There was also Dick Turpin, the English highwayman turned Robin Hood. In "The Unwelcome Guest," Guthrie's improvisation on the traditional English ballad "Bonnie Black Bess" (also a popular cowboy song), Dick Turpin speaks to his horse, Black Bess, contemplating his outlaw life and asserting that he is a noble robber. As his traditional role dictates, he never steals from widows, orphans, or hard-working people, but Guthrie adds a bit of ambiguity to this traditional role as Turpin almost existentially questions the righteousness of his crimes:

I don't know, good horse, as we trot in this dark here

That robbing the rich is for worse or for best;

They take it by stealing and lying and gambling

And I take it my way, my shiny Black Bess. (*Every 100 Years* 105)

This is almost a confession of sorts. It's an acknowledgement that no matter how much he tries to justify his outlaw acts through a noble robber tradition, in the end, they're selfish or individualistic acts. Guthrie is reiterating his frequent critique of the outlaw who has "the right idea but . . . the wrong system" by resorting to crime rather than working toward collective acts of protest: "The outlaw tries to whip the world down to his own size and then he finds out that the world is a whole lot bigger than him . . . so by

yourself, even with a couple of Tommy guns, you're beat before the cards are dealt" (*Hard Hitting Songs* 114; *Pastures of Plenty* 80). The outlaw is utterly alone in his acts, and Turpin foresees his lonely death, surrounded by "they," the law: "Yes, they'll catch me napping one day and they'll kill me / And then I'll be gone" (*Every 100 Years* 105). But, as noted earlier, the one thing the outlaw does right, for Guthrie, is to try his best. This individual spirit, the outlaw force, perpetuates the tradition and makes it a useful role to enact change. Turpin may foresee his physical death, but he also foresees the continuance of his spirit via tradition: "that won't be my end; / For my guns and my saddle will always be filled / By unwelcome travelers and other brave men" (*Every 100 Years* 105).

In a 1941 letter to Paul Robeson that was most likely never sent, Guthrie remembers an evening they spent at a cocktail party following a Robeson concert. In a way, the letter is akin to "The Unwelcome Guest" because Guthrie sounds as if he's contemplating his life as a performer, speaking to himself more than for Robeson's benefit. "I could make the labor movement a good Jesse James," he remembers telling another party guest, Blacky Myers, Vice President of the National Maritime Union (*Pastures of Plenty* 69). "But at what cost?" he seems to ask himself as he tells Robeson about how he and his first wife were separating because of his political views and general rambling impulse. Later in the night, Guthrie sang "Jesse James" for Robeson. In that performance, in which he "felt so much sympathy for these Missouri farm boys that our system of lackamoney forced to get their good money at the wrong end of a gun barrel," Guthrie "decided right then and there to keep on going with my job of turning

out such kinds of balladsong for folks a hundred generations from us to learn how things were with our bunch here” (*Pastures of Plenty* 70). The implicit connection between singing the outlaw song and realizing he needed to continue to perform the outlaw role demonstrates Guthrie’s attempt to fill the saddle, in a different way than those who followed in Turpin’s steps, of the outlaw tradition.

It’s fitting, then, that it was around this time that Lester Balog took one of the most iconic photos of Guthrie: Guthrie looks to have emerged from a crowd, blowing smoke almost defiantly, harmonica holder loose around his neck, cigarette poised in his left hand, and his right arm resting on top of a guitar, across which he has brushed with broad strokes “This Machine Kills Fascists.”<sup>34</sup> This is the image of a folk outlaw performer. What this image has come to represent is not unlike the only verifiable tintype of Billy the Kid, standing at attention with his cocky stare, left hand gripping the muzzle end of his rifle. In one sense, this image of Guthrie stands in perilous danger of merely attracting a romantic fascination of his status as a folk—or cultural—outlaw, just as Billy the Kid became a folk hero, regardless of his criminality, for city kids reading about him in dime novels around the turn of the twentieth century. This romantic consideration of the outlaw does play an important role in preserving the tradition of the folk outlaw, but it is also imperative to consider what this tradition historically and

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<sup>34</sup> It is not known exactly where or when in 1941 Balog took this photo. It’s likely, however, that the photo was taken while Guthrie was touring the West Coast with the Almanac Singers. Since Lester Balog, a labor activist and filmmaker, produced a film depicting the 1941 Labor Day parade in San Francisco and Guthrie was performing for workers perhaps only a week prior to Labor Day, an educated guess possibly narrows the date and place of the photo to the end of August 1941, San Francisco.

critically represents. All too often, we forget the urgency behind Guthrie's scrawl or that the Kid's rifle might have taken a man's life.

Guthrie, in his version of "Billy the Kid," which is similar to Rev. Andrew Jenkins' ballad, doesn't forget the violence of the Kid's myth: he killed his first man at the age of sixteen, murdered a prison guard at the Las Cruces jail, and was said to have killed twenty-one men by the age of twenty-one. Guthrie doesn't neglect Jesse James's violent side either. One variant, Mark Allan Jackson notes, "stands alone as a tale of Jesse's murderous tendencies" (*Prophet Singer* 175). The version Jackson refers to is a recording Guthrie made for Moses Asch in 1944, which was an adaptation of Lead Belly's version of "The Old Chisholm Trail," and Guthrie's imagination adds a much bloodier take on Lead Belly's brief mention of Jesse James: "And in that bloody battle with Frank and Jesse James / My partners fell around me with bullets in their brains" (*The Asch Recordings* Disc 1 Track 19). Jackson cites this variant as an example that shows "that Guthrie does not mindlessly follow the line that all outlaws—especially Jesse James—are heroes; he can buck tradition and offer us a vision of the extreme violence that this outlaw truly engaged in during his career" (*Prophet Singer* 175). But a survey of Guthrie's variants of James's tale demonstrates a strange ambivalence about Jesse James, as if Guthrie couldn't decide which James he should portray. Overall, taking into account the variants and comments Guthrie made about James, the good man version wins out, but the variants range from the more violent Asch recording to Guthrie's adaptation of the traditional Jesse James ballad, which in one version starts off with affirmation of James's violence, "Jesse James and his boys they have killed a many

a man,” but slips quickly into the populist good man James (WGA Song 1, Box 2, Folder 14). A manuscript footnote to this variant further emphasizes that James was forced to become an outlaw by corrupt law, and he once again presents his thoughts on the good man outside the law: “peace officers can be more outside the law than the lawbreakers lots of times” (WGA Song 1, Box 2, Folder 14). Still another version of this variant included in *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* goes even further by setting an indignant tone to emphasize their victimization: Frank and Jesse James might have “killed many a man, / But they never was outlaws at heart,” railroad bullies who attacked their home and family pushed them to it, and Guthrie scandalizes Robert Ford even more, calling him a coward *and* a bastard (113).

Jesse James might have been in Guthrie’s mind when he wrote “Pretty Boy Floyd,” his contribution to the canon of classic outlaw ballads, which recycles all of the positive myths about Jesse James and applies them to Floyd’s myth. He wrote the ballad two months after Henry King’s *Jesse James* was released. It was one of the top grossing films of the year (in the company of *Gone with the Wind*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*). In his *Hard Hitting Songs* introduction to “Jesse James and His Boys,” Guthrie notes that he “got some of the ideas [for the song] from the picture show” (112). While Guthrie represents Floyd as a modern-day Robin Hood like Jesse James, he by no means stretches the Dust Bowlers’—his core audience at the time—popular imagination of Floyd. As Martin Butler notes, “The ‘public temper’ of Depression Oklahoma seemed to be conducive to the emergence of social bandits like Pretty Boy [who] symbolized justice and moral

integrity in a country in which injustice ... seemed to be gaining the upper hand” (*Voices of the Down and Out* 99). Additionally, in the popular folklore concerning Floyd, not only is he represented as a figure who symbolizes justice and moral integrity, but it is also suggested that his outlaw status was a result of the law’s oppression. In John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Mrs. Joad ruminates that Floyd “was full of hell, sure, like a good boy oughta be ... He done a little bad thing an’ they hurt ’im ... so he was mad, an’ the nex’ bad thing he done was mad, an’ they hurt ’im again. An’ purty soon he was mean-mad” (76). Guthrie likewise represents Floyd’s outlaw act as involuntary, but he goes a step further in cleaning up Floyd’s image.

It might be obvious to note that Guthrie’s ballad isn’t exactly historically accurate. Not only does he omit any implication that Floyd had been arrested and jailed a number of times, but he also fabricates the incident that sets Floyd on the outlaw path—although it might have been one of many stories floating around that created Floyd’s mythology. Not that any of this matters. What matters is how Guthrie constructs the myth. The initial incident demonstrates a tension between judicial law and social/moral law. Upon arriving in Shawnee with his wife, Floyd hitched up his horses along the street. At this point, “a deputy sheriff approached him, / In a manner rather rude, / Using vulgar words of language, / And his wife she overheard” (*Every 100 Years* 83). Guthrie tells Alan Lomax that the legal issue the deputy “proceeded to bawl Pretty Boy out for” was “a new ruling [made] since Pretty Boy had been to town the week before about tying your horses . . . well, automobiles was getting pretty thick down there” (*Library of Congress Recordings* Disc 2 Track 1). To defend his wife’s honor and protect himself



from the unprovoked force of law, Floyd “grabbed a log chain, / And the deputy grabbed a gun,” and, ultimately, Floyd slays the deputy (*Every 100 Years* 83). Thus, Floyd is forced to assume the role of the outlaw in defense of individual rights and decency: as Guthrie tells Lomax, it was against social custom to use vulgar language in front of a lady. After Floyd killed the deputy, Guthrie says, “every crime in Oklahoma was added to his name,” so Floyd reasoned: ““They making me an outlaw. They’re getting money and I’m getting the advertisement.’ He said, ‘I think I’ll just reverse the deal.’ He said, ‘I’m gonna take the cash and let the credit go’” (*Every 100 Years* 83; *Library of Congress Recordings* Disc 2 Track 1). What follows is a number of Robin Hood-like deeds on the part of Floyd: he pays a starving farmer’s mortgage, leaves a thousand dollar bill under a napkin for a charitable meal, and sends a “carload of groceries” on Christmas “for the families on relief” (*Every 100 Years* 83).

Clearly, Guthrie wasn’t concerned with historical accuracy in the ballad and was more intent on using Floyd’s good man outlaw role to serve as a representative in order to critique larger social problems. “Robbery,” Guthrie quips, “is a chapter in etiquette,” which means that robbery is a socially relative term to who is doing the robbing: “a policeman will jest stand there an let a banker rob a farmer . . . But if a farmer robs a banker—you wood have a hole dern army of cops out shooting at him. (*Woody Sez* 17, 14-17). Guthrie levels the field as he presents the “moral” of “Pretty Boy Floyd,” however: “Some will rob you with a six-gun, / And some with a fountain pen” (*Every 100 Years* 83). Guthrie concludes the song by inverting the ethics of robbery, demonstrating the difference between the good man outside the law and the bad man

inside it: “You won’t never see an outlaw, / Drive a family from their home” (*Every 100 Years* 83). Guthrie uses Pretty Boy Floyd, the representative outlaw, as a vehicle to deliver this message, as a character playing a role in a larger social drama, even implicitly referring to Floyd as a fictional creation to Lomax: “his *character* was shot down” like all of the classic outlaw figures (*Library of Congress Recordings* Disc 2 Track 2, my emphasis).

“The Outlaw is in his grave today. So is Jesse James. So is Billy, the Kid, so is Cole Younger, and Belle Starr . . . but we still sing about them” says Guthrie of Floyd (*Hard Hitting Songs* 114). The popular fascination with these outlaws, even though they “tried and done it wrong,” Guthrie seems to suggest, is that their role and acts represent everybody’s possible victimization at the hands of the law (*Hard Hitting Songs* 115). In “This Life Is Hard,” Guthrie categorizes many of the outlaws he sings about as poor boys: “Old Pretty Boy had a hard time, pore boy / Well the sheriff locked him up and then the people they turned him loose / Old Pretty Boy had a hard time, pore boy” (WGA Song 1, Box 3, Folder 27). In each verse he inserts a different outlaw. In the manuscript footnote he instructs, “I thought maybe you could take it from here and sing your own outlaws. If you sing about everybody living on the outside of the good law you’ll be adding your wife’s name, your mother’s name . . . and your own name to the list” (WGA Song 1, Box 3, Folder 27). Thus, Guthrie implies that the role of the classic outlaw can be extended to non-traditional outlaws, and from this position, recognizing a bit of the outlaw in one’s own situation, the cultural force of the outlaw figure can be used as a means to protest. And it’s not accomplished by glorification of the outlaw’s

criminal acts, however, but by harnessing his or her “guts and nerve” and organizing (*Pasture of Plenty* 80).

### Social Outlaws on the Freedom Highway

The day before Guthrie penned “Pretty Boy Floyd,” he wrote “Be Kind to This Boy on the Road.” The song is a parable of sorts: “O who is that boy on the white winding highway? / And why does he roam alone? / He is looking for life on that white winding highway / For his parents dealt him trouble at home” (WGA Song 1, Box 1, Folder 2). This is not specifically a song about a runaway or wayward child. As he does with Floyd’s character, Guthrie uses the example of the young social outlaw to illustrate a larger point. “Don’t point your finger at that boy,” says the narrator, because he has enough trouble as it is, and anyone who might have the same trouble could find themselves in the same position (WGA Song 1, Box 1, Folder 2). The narrative moves from the singular case of this particular boy’s trouble in the first part (the manuscript has three eight-line stanzas) to incorporating the imagined audience, casting his lot with theirs in the second: “Your policeman discourages that boy on that highway / It’s hard wherever that he goes / But the best way to help that boy on the highway / Is to fix all your trouble at home” (WGA Song 1, Box 1, Folder 2). At this point it’s clear that “home” means more than a place to live. Opposed to the placeless highway, it represents settled society and culture, and, on the one hand, the boy represents the social outlaws

who are outcast from the security of the idealized home. On the other hand, the third part complicates the initial reaction that this boy is to be pitied, needs to be re-incorporated into society, and is merely a victim of the troubles at home. Rather, the boy as social outlaw emerges as one who is out to change the status quo. He wasn't cast out, but took to the road of his own volition: "I've heard it said about these rolly stone boys / That they gather no moss in their lives, / But I'll tell you that the bee that gets the honey / Ain't the bee that hangs around the hive" (WGA Song 1, Box 1, Folder 2). The kindness the narrator asks to give is not for the boy's benefit, but society's, in general. "Remember," sums up the narrator, "the men that wrote the bible / are the men that gave up their homes" (WGA Song 1, Box 1, Folder 2).

It's not returning home that provides creative salvation for the self and society, but embracing the opportunities gained by a placeless existence. If it isn't clear that Guthrie has made a case for the benefits of a representative social outlaw's life by basically refiguring and inverting the parable of the Prodigal Son, his manuscript footnote clarifies this intent. Guthrie invokes the crossroad myth to make his point: "I stood there at a crossroads one day . . . and I tossed me up my last buffalo nickel and let heads or tails tell me which fork of the highway to take . . . I've done this same thing over and over at a thousand crossroads . . . and no matter which way it took me I always said to myself, this old world needs some good fixing bad and I aim to try to fix it if I can" (WGA Song 1, Box 1, Folder 2). This moment of acceptance of chance at the placeless crossroads demonstrates succinctly Guthrie's and his subject's outlaw persona and his interpretation of freedom. For the most part, Guthrie's outlaws represent a

positive performance of freedom, the outlaw's impulse to act toward something rather than for the purpose of separation. For Guthrie, the positive performative act of freedom was to act toward social change and integration, but in order to achieve this goal, a negative freedom of placelessness was necessary, so his representatives of social change are always characterized as outlaws. Thus, Guthrie developed his model of the social outlaw from the classic outlaw tradition, and by the time he moved to New York City, his outlaws distinctly shifted from the classic to the social model, heralded by the representative anthem of his outlaw territory: "This Land Is Your Land."

Guthrie penned "This Land Is Your Land" a week after his arrival in New York. It's both a celebratory and an angry song, as ambivalent as the folk outlaw in American culture. For a good majority of its life, the song was sung as romantic revelry, an alternate national anthem taught to school children in the company of "God Bless America," the very song that angered Guthrie so much that he was compelled to answer it with "This Land." The song's "outlaw" verses, those that countered the song's optimism with an incisive critique of core American ideals, were all but forgotten until the 1960s. Just as Guthrie's overall radicalism as a performer has been re-established by now, so too has the defiance of "This Land," made clear in Pete Seeger's and Bruce Springsteen's performance of all the outlaw verses at Barack Obama's first inauguration. In the process of re-discovering and performing the song as protest, however, it's sometimes forgotten that Guthrie wasn't criticizing America as an idea, but rather American society that forgets the picture from life's other side is of the same coin. The performance at Obama's inauguration, however, clearly demonstrates the song's

ambivalence, because it was sung in its complete form in the spirit of celebration—the same spirit, Mark Allan Jackson argues, in which Guthrie composed the song: “An understanding of the positives and negatives of America and the people in it allowed Guthrie personal transcendence and redemption. The nation he writes of does not exclude the ugly in order to emphasize the beautiful” (*Prophet Singer* 28). “This Land” reveals the essential outlaw territory and impulse within America and presents it as a space in which to reinvigorate core American ideals.

Kate Smith’s rendition of “God Bless America” (written by Irving Berlin in 1918) was a national hit when Guthrie wrote “This Land.” Guthrie had seen too much that made the song seem much too patriotically complacent. “God bless America, my home sweet home”: Guthrie challenges this statement with a defiant ramble and survey of outlaw territory, the nowhere and everywhere on the other side of the big high wall with its Private Property sign:

There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me;

A sign was painted said: Private Property,

But on the back side it didn’t say nothin’.

This land was made for you and me. (*My Dusty Road* Disc 1 Track 1)

Guthrie returns to the image of the wall or some similar divide a number of times in his writings as a symbol of the law making people social outlaws and disenfranchising them from the American Dream: “You break the law and you don’t know it, cause they pass ‘em so fast you can’t keep up with ‘em. . . . if it keeps up, keeps a goin’ that a way, the day and time will soon come when we’ll just have to build a big cement wall around the

world and all of us go and get in it” (*Hard Hitting Songs* 70). The “back side,” the antithesis, yet refiguring, of “home sweet home,” is where the marginalized can claim the inheritance of the outlaw. Whether Guthrie knew it or not, the official legal action of outlawry as practiced from medieval Europe into twentieth-century America had often been used as a “common device to obtain control of property” (Prassel 73). In both England and America, outlawry was even extended to the minor offense of trespassing, which would then allow seizure of the perpetrator’s property.

Guthrie isn’t so much challenging private property laws, but rather espousing the idea that claims on the country can only be made by the propertied. A “home sweet home” is not a concrete thing, but a feeling of belonging. In fact, Guthrie’s answer to “God Bless America” never mentions “home,” but characterizes the feeling of belonging as something less sacrosanct and legally binding and more attuned to Guthrie’s stronger belief in “natural” laws: a freedom of movement and freedom to obtain the necessities of life. Guthrie further emphasizes the disparity between the ideals and reality of American society as he pictures people standing outside a relief office:

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,  
By the relief office I seen my people;  
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking  
Is this land made for you and me? (*Every 100 Years* 97)

This scene literally stands in stark contrast to the picture of the American land Guthrie rambles across, which is full of light as “the sun came shining”: there’s a “golden valley,” “sparkling sands of her diamond deserts,” and golden “wheat fields waving”

(*Every 100 Years* 97). Yet, Guthrie sees his people in the shadows of a tall edifice, another wall-like image. While a scene like this might suggest that the law is providing benefits to those who are down-trodden, Guthrie's question demonstrates the irony that the law is providing relief for a system it created, which invariably reinforces the outcast existence of those standing in line. The message is clear: there is something wrong with a system that forces people into these relief lines, makes them social outlaws, made even bleaker and ironic when juxtaposed with the abundance of the country's wheat fields waving. Guthrie's rambling outlaw challenges the system and reaffirms the natural laws of freedom in a verse that was not included in the original manuscript, appearing instead in a 1947 songbook:

Nobody living can ever stop me,

As I go walking that freedom highway;

Nobody living can ever make me turn back,

This land was made for you and me. (*Every 100 Years* 97)

It's the mantra of Guthrie's representative social outlaw. While it presents a rugged individualist attitude, its reaffirmation of natural freedom is meant to speak for the collective because anyone singing the song can perform the outlaw role. For Guthrie, singing "this land was made for you and me" is a way to effect a collective claim upon the land that joins everyone together: "The main thing about this song is, you think about these Eight words all the rest of your life and they'll come a bubbling up into Eighty Jillion all union. Try it and see." (*Ten of Woody Guthrie's Twenty-five Cent Songs* 3).



The force of these eight words doesn't originate from the idealized "home sweet home," but from a "freedom highway" with its many crossroads.

The social representative outlaws Guthrie developed after he arrived in New York were iterations of the archetype he created in "This Land," particularly his ballads of Harriet Tubman, Tom Joad, and Jesus Christ. Clearly, Guthrie moved beyond the classic good man outlaws by this point, but he did not abandon the tradition they represent, focusing on the core attributes of the classic outlaw and transposing them to figures that wouldn't normally be categorized as "outlaw." He further calls attention to his improvisation on the outlaw tradition by using the tunes of classic outlaw ballads to accompany his social outlaw ballads. Thus, an immediate connection between the classic and the social outlaw is made in "Tom Joad" (to the tune of "John Hardy was a Desperate Little Man") and "Jesus Christ" (to the tune of "Jesse James"). It's a disruption of the tradition that places emphasis on the outlaw's core attributes—what makes an outlaw an outlaw—instead of focusing on the outlaw as a specific person. This focus demonstrates more the social implications of the outlaw role.

At the root of the role Guthrie probes with his cast of social outlaws is freedom, including the use of this freedom to bring people together. Guthrie even partially reverses this process, perhaps as a reflexive exercise, in his adaptation of the traditional outlaw ballad "John Hardy" by refiguring the bad man Hardy (Guthrie calls him Johnny Hart at times) as a slave who kills a man as he tries to make it to the "free state line" (*The Asch Recordings* Disc 2 Track 17). This improvisation clearly brings into focus the

essential issue of freedom in Guthrie's outlaws. It is so essential in Hardy's case that he chooses death over slavery in a final verse that characterizes the entire world as a prison:

You've got guards to the east and guards to the west.

You've got guards this whole world round,

But before I'll be a slave I'll rot in your bed

You can take me to my hangin' ground, mister jail,

Take me to my hangin' ground. (*The Asch Recordings* Disc 2 Track 17)

In 1944, five months after Guthrie recorded "Johnny Hart" for Moses Asch, he composed "Harriet Tubman's Ballad" inspired by *Harriet Tubman: Negro Soldier and Abolitionist* (1942), but he no doubt had Johnny Hart in mind as well. Talking about John Hardy's story in 1942, Guthrie comments: "Underground railroads were almost a religious thought to the Negroes, because it meant a train that would come and carry you away from here to a land where you could be free to do your work and live your life to the brim" (*Pastures of Plenty* 79). In this context Hardy's connection to Tubman, the famous Underground Railroad conductor, is obvious. Guthrie's Tubman ballad, sung from Tubman's perspective, is a standard historical narrative of her life, but Guthrie also, perhaps unconsciously, dramatizes "This Land" in Tubman's narrative of walking her own freedom highway, the Underground Railroad. In the ballad, when Tubman first escapes to freedom, "The sun was shining in the early morning / When I come to my free state line / I pinched myself to see if I was dreaming / I just could not believe my eyes" (*My Dusty Road* Disc 3 Track 6). As in "This Land" ("when the sun came shining, and I was strolling") freedom is represented by sunlight (*Every 100 Years* 97). Later,

when she returns to conduct her family and others north,” One slave got scared and he tried to turn backwards / I pulled my pistol in front of his eyes. / I said get up and walk to your freedom / Or by this fireball you will die” (*My Dusty Road* Disc 3 Track 6). Here, Tubman, with her gun, enforces the outlaw’s mantra: “Nobody living can make me turn back” (*Every 100 Years* 97).

As early as December 1940, Guthrie was already reworking “John Hardy,” and he performed it (followed by “Jesse James” and “Tom Joad”) as a guest on Lead Belly’s WNYC radio show. Guthrie learned the tune by listening to the Carter Family’s version of the song earlier that year while staying with Alan Lomax during the Library of Congress recordings. Less than a month later, he composed “Tom Joad.” The WNYC performance as a whole demonstrates Guthrie’s improvisation on the traditional outlaw role. In terms of performance for strictly entertainment purposes, Guthrie’s choice to bookend his three-song set with lengthy songs that use the same musical arrangement may not seem wise. But as a way to expand his audience’s conception of the outlaw, it works quite well. The slightly revised “John Hardy” and “Tom Joad” blend into each other, the latter sounding like a reprise, with Guthrie’s version of “Jesse James” serving as a musical and thematic bridge. We can hear the process by which Guthrie transformed the classic good man outlaw for his own purposes.

The achievement of “Tom Joad” is that, as many (including John Steinbeck) have pointed out, Guthrie condenses the Joads’ epic tale into seventeen verses. Even though Victor asked Guthrie to write a ballad that would cash in on the popularity of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad served as a perfect mirror of Guthrie’s view of the outlaw.

As in the case of Harriet Tubman, Guthrie didn't need to change the story, and Joad's journey from ex-convict walking the road alone to outlaw representative of the people was a ready-made development with which Guthrie had already been working. Even the two murders Joad is responsible for reflect this development. The initial crime was a result of a drunken brawl in which Joad kills a man (who'd stabbed him) with a shovel. The second murder occurs after Joad kills a deputy sheriff who had just killed preacher Casey, a representative outlaw. In this act, Joad takes on Casey's outlaw role and belief that, in contrast to his earlier detached attitude,

Ev'rybody might be just one big soul,

Well it looks that a-way to me.

Everywhere that you look, in the day or night

That's where I'm gonna be, Ma,

That's where I'm gonna be. (*The Nearly Complete Collection of Woody Guthrie Folk Songs* 92)

Guthrie paraphrases Steinbeck here, but the vision of the world as one big union and the outlaw as their herald certainly meshed with Guthrie's own ideas. Also, the statement is a positive refiguring of Johnny Hart's characterization of the world as one big prison. Again, Guthrie's outlaw claims the back side of the wall as a means to enact social change.

But before Guthrie wrote "Tom Joad," he made perhaps the greatest disruptive leap in his improvisation by characterizing "Jesus Christ" as an outlaw. In his Library of Congress recordings, Guthrie makes the link clear even before he begins singing "They

Laid Jesus Christ in His Grave,” a song he’d written two weeks earlier, by talking about Pretty Boy Floyd and Jesse James, their popularity and the people’s reverence for them as good man outlaws. The song, Guthrie explains, is “about a man I suppose was more popular than anybody in his own day and time. I think he was called an outlaw. Mighty unpopular to be called Christian in the days this man was livin’” (*Library of Congress Recordings* Disc 2 Track 3). Guthrie’s “Jesus Christ” is not only sung to the tune of “Jesse James,” but also works with the same lyric structure, and has all the earmarks of the outlaw ballads discussed thus far, except one: this “good man” outside the law never killed anyone. Who could be more symbolic as a collectivist outlaw? Jesus Christ represents the qualities that define Guthrie’s ideal outlaw: he attempts to organize and dies for what he believes in. Throughout his writings and recordings, Guthrie often equated Jesus with the outlaw role, “a union man . . . really what you would call in our day and time, a union organizer” (“Woody Guthrie Album: Jesus Christ” WGA Manuscript 2, Box 1, Folder 35, Page 1). Apparently, Guthrie was particularly struck by this thought in the winter of 1940 when he wrote “Jesus Christ” (March 5) for he also wrote “A Hard Workin Man Was Jesus” the week before (February 24). In fact, it appears that “A Hard Workin Man Was Jesus” is the first rendering of “Jesus Christ” in light of the strong similarities in the way Jesus is portrayed—Jesus was a “hard working man” who tells the “rich man” to “sell your lands, / And pass it around to the poor” (WGA Notebook 1, Item 4, Page 180). If we take into account Guthrie’s composition of “This Land” the day before he wrote “A Hard Workin Man Was Jesus,” we can establish

a progressive development of Guthrie's ideal collectivist outlaw as emerging from the implied role of the outlaw in "This Land."

Evidence that "This Land" was still fresh in Guthrie's mind—and perhaps the impetus for him to create such an outlaw ballad—when he began working on his ballad of Jesus can be found in the first verse:

I heard of this country called heaven

For the pure, and the brave, and the free

As told by the carpenter, Jesus,

And it all looks easy to me. (WGA Notebook 1, Item 4, Page 180)

"Heaven" is characterized as the ideal country, the dream of the American country represented in "This Land" where there are no "Private Property" signs and the "hard working people" do not have to stand in relief lines. There is no need for outlaws here where the country is only "for the pure, and the brave, and the free." This echo of "The Star-Spangled Banner" makes it clear that Guthrie is talking about an ideal America and further suggests the song's compositional tie with "This Land," which certainly displays Guthrie's attempt to write a more realistic "national anthem"—an anthem for the outcasts that makes it clear that the country is living up to its anthemic claims. Guthrie proceeds in a similar manner in the second verse, providing the reality of living in America:

I looked this whole world over—;

I looked it over and o'er—

The rich take away all our freedom

And then they make fun of the poor. (WGA Notebook 1, Item 4, Page 180)

As he does in “This Land,” Guthrie contrasts the dream of America with the reality: freedom is not guaranteed and the “hard working man” that represents the poor is treated like an outlaw. Guthrie’s note at the bottom of the page makes it even clearer that Jesus is a representative figure of the collective outlaw implied in “This Land” and fully realized in “Jesus Christ.” “[Jesus] said his self that it was mighty risky business to walk up before the police, or the judge, or the congress, or the president, and say for the rich folks to give the poor folks money and lands and houses and farms back to them” (WGA Notebook 1, Item 4, Page 180).

### This Machine Kills Fascists

With America’s mounting involvement in WWII, Guthrie’s outlaw persona and subject matter took on a world view. He even amended “this land is your land” in a comment following “The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done” in his 1945 songbook: “This world is your world take it easy but take it” (*Ten of Woody Guthrie’s Twenty-five Cent Songs* 5). To Guthrie, fascism represented the oppressive, “unnatural” law he’d been speaking out against: “Because all of the laws of man working in nature and history and evolution say for all human beings to come always closer and closer together—to know and understand all races, creeds, and colors better, and fascism says

for us to split ourselves up into ten thousand cliques and clans and beat our own chains of slavery onto our ankles” (*Pastures of Plenty* 104-5). Music was a weapon to fight these unnatural laws and the outlaw performer was the boundary-crosser who helped to bring everyone together through music. It had to be the right music, however, not the pop and “sentimental crap” Guthrie loathed. This was the type of music that helped to oppress the people: “The rich men first used songs as a weapon against the workers. To keep men doped and women floating around in the dim lights and low clouds—sentimental crap to make your heart nice and tender so’s you wouldn’t raise no fuss” (*Pastures of Plenty* 82). Guthrie anticipates Adorno’s argument in the *Culture Industry* here, and he extends the implication to fascism, citing Hitler’s control over radio stations “[t]o keep down music and singing” (*Pastures of Plenty* 83). Thus, Guthrie’s claim that his guitar could kill fascists was an earnest belief. During the war it could help inspire people to come together as a nation and fight the fascist threat, which Guthrie emphasized was not just in Europe: “You don’t have to make a trip to Europe to find a crook. You don’t have to go to Europe to find plenty to do to beat Hitler” (*Pastures of Plenty* 83).

By the end of the war, Guthrie had come a long way since his days as the Dustiest of the Dustbowlers on KFVD, developing from a regionally-known to a nationally-known performer. In a 1946 letter to Irving Lerner, Guthrie appears to take stock of his role as an outlaw performer as he found himself for the first time in a somewhat settled life, living with his second wife and children in Coney Island. Pitching a movie idea to Lerner, Guthrie describes a ballad singer, the lead role of the movie, as



“a mystery to everybody except to his own self. He is even lectured to by timberjacks, cowboys, foremen, good citizens, home renters and home owner, drug and prescription store owners, and by members of the left and right wings of the labor struggle” (*Born to Win* 126). While it sounds like Guthrie is suggesting an archetypal ballad singer, it’s clear that this is an idealization of and rumination on his own role: “Take some simple ballad, like ‘Goin’ Down this Road’ or ‘This Land is Made for You and Me,’ and follow the tracks of the singer from coast to coast” (*Born to Win* 122). The movie pitch illustrates what Guthrie saw as the performative force of the folk outlaw role, its cultural impact and representation, while also describing the cultural displacement of the folk outlaw, his acceptance and exile from a real home:

His same old ballad would keep echoing back again to carry his mind and his feet on out and up and down some long, lonesome, moneyless road. The theme is that he cannot always tell nor make plain what a big and terrible spirit he has learned to live in. He is always paid back more than he puts in. His terrible lonesomeness at times is paid back by an equal amount of warmest welcome. His days and nights in all kinds of weathers are paid back by a look that he sees and knows in the peoples’ eyes and on their faces. This is his pay, his learning, his whole wealth, and his whole knowledge, this, and the millions of words that they all dig out of their deeper selves and swap to him for his gifts (*Born to Win* 127).

The “big and terrible spirit:” what does Guthrie mean? In one sense, he contemplates the ambivalence of the outlaw’s role in culture and society, seeming to ponder his own role as an outlaw, like Dick Turpin in “The Unwelcome Guest.” “Big” is the continuing

tradition of the outlaw, and “terrible” is the tradition’s potential disruptive force. Part of participating and/or performing from this tradition is also “terrible,” because it alienates the outlaw from society, results in “terrible lonesomeness” and placelessness with no shelter of home. The payoff, for Guthrie, however, is the commerce between the people this outlaw meets and seeks to represent which results in both the people and the outlaw understanding their deeper selves. In this way, Guthrie transforms the tradition of an outlaw like Turpin—who merely plays a set role—improvising upon it in order to present a model of a social outlaw that performs and acts toward a collective end. For Guthrie, spirit, the deeper social self, is something greater than tradition.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE PERFORMER AS CULTURAL OUTLAW: BOB DYLAN, ALIAS

An' I walked my road an' sung my song

Like an arch criminal who'd done no wrong

An' committed no crime but was screamin' through the bars

A someone else's prison—

— Bob Dylan “Joan Baez in Concert, Part 2 (jacket notes)” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 78)

How does it feel

How does it feel

To be without a home

Like a complete unknown

Like a rolling stone?

— Bob Dylan “Like a Rolling Stone” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 191)

To live outside the law, you must be honest.

— Bob Dylan “Absolutely Sweet Marie” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 233)

“We have, once again, embarked on a voyage to reclaim America,” said Allen Ginsberg, standing next to Bob Dylan on the deck of the *Mayflower* replica, as Rambling

Jack Elliott shouted “Ahoy!” from the top of the mizzenmast (Shelton 452). The scene could be an updated version of “Bob Dylan’s 115<sup>th</sup> Dream” (recorded over a decade earlier), Dylan’s raucous send-up of American history and culture, which begins with Dylan sailing on the *Mayflower* with Captain Arab, spying land, and proclaiming, “I think I’ll call it America” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 170). It was October 31, 1975, and New England was gearing up for the American bicentennial. Ginsberg, Elliott, Joan Baez, Roger McGuinn, Ronee Blakely, a number of other musicians, and a large support staff—taken together, over seventy people—had joined together to realize Dylan’s dream of forming a gypsy-like caravan of performers to “wake up the country” (Sloman 331). The Rolling Thunder Revue began its pilgrimage in Plymouth, MA, making its *Mayflower* expedition before playing a second show at the Plymouth War Memorial Auditorium. The captain appeared onstage wearing a see-through mask that night, making him look like a ghost while performing “When I Paint My Masterpiece,” the uncanniness of the moment punctuated by the time he delivers the third line: “You can almost think that you’re seein’ your double” (*Renaldo and Clara*). Even more uncanny is the revenance of a Halloween concert eleven years earlier when Dylan joked, “It’s just Halloween. I have my Bob Dylan mask on. I’m mask-erading” (*Live 1964* Disc 1 Track 6).

The tension between the individual outlaw and his role in cultural performance and history is always present in Dylan’s performance persona and integral to understanding the outlaw figures that appear in his work. This tension manifests in key outlaw/trickster traits: elusiveness, reflexivity as an awareness of constructing cultural

myth, iterations of identity by virtue of personae, disguise, doubling, and self-honesty. The central stake in this individual/collective conflict, as we've seen throughout this project, is freedom. In Dylan's case, this freedom is negative in terms of the individual necessarily removing his or her self from social and cultural hang-ups in order to make way for a positive freedom, the disruptive, creative cultural act. As Victor Turner argues, this process—in essence, a voluntary positioning of the self in outlaw territory—is a social necessity:

[A]ny society which hopes to be imperishable must whittle out for itself a piece of space and a while of time, in which it can look honestly at itself. This honesty is not that of the scientist, who exchanges the honesty of his ego for the objectivity of his gaze . . . It is, rather, akin to the supreme honesty of the creative artist who . . . reserves to himself the privilege of seeing straight what all cultures build crooked. (*Anthropology of Performance* 122)

It's an alienating process, something that Dylan experienced acutely early in his career, even before his performative symbolic break from the folk establishment—the “forced folk into bed with rock” phase—at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. A prose poem, “Advice for Geraldine on Her Miscellaneous Birthday,” included in the program book for Dylan's 1964 Halloween concert at the New York Philharmonic Hall scrutinizes the alienating process, resonating distinctly with Dylan's “Bob Dylan mask” joke. Dylan ironically advises Geraldine, “people / are afraid of someone who is not / in step with them. . . . they'll feel / threatened,” so “do Not create anything, it will be / misinterpreted. . . . when asked / t' give your real name . . . never give it” (*Lyrics* 1962-

1985 124-25, last ellipsis in original). In the end, the implied advice isn't actually to conform, but to keep the private and public selves separate, wear a mask and give "them" an alias. Two years later, Dylan was finding the task almost unmanageable. Discussing the hostile reaction by fans and the press to his electric performances with the Hawks (later, The Band), a visibly weary Dylan comments, "I'm gonna get me a new Bob Dylan next week. Gonna get me a new Bob Dylan and use him. Use the new Bob Dylan, see how long he lasts" (*No Direction Home*). Two decades later, Dylan remained consistent in this separation: "I don't think of myself as Bob Dylan. It's like Rimbaud said, 'I is another'" (*Biograph* Sleeve Notes).

"As Alias," not only a character Dylan played in Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, but also a mask of cultural performance, I as another, Stephen Scobie argues, "Bob Dylan is always someone else, always a deferral, always a ghost" (44). This assessment goes beyond the common knowledge that "Bob Dylan" is literally a legal alias for Robert Zimmerman (Dylan legally changed his name in 1962), and Dylan has mystified even this fact. While "explaining" his rationale for choosing Bob Dylan as an alias in *Chronicles* (2004), Dylan strangely defers his identity, talking instead about a Hell's Angel named Bobby Zimmerman, who crashed his motorcycle and died in 1961 (Dylan mistakes the date as 1964). By way of self-referential deferral Dylan concludes, "That person is gone. That was the end of him" (79). In a 2012 *Rolling Stone* interview, Dylan mystifies this deferral even further, citing transfiguration as an explanation. The exchange between Mikal Gilmore, the interviewer, and Dylan reads like a one of Dylan's interview "put ons" for which he's been notorious throughout his career. Dylan

claims, when Gilmore asks questions pertaining to a pre-transfigured Robert Zimmerman/Bob Dylan, that “you’re asking them to a person who’s long dead. You’re asking them to a person that doesn’t exist. But people make that mistake about me all the time” (46). As cryptic as this exchange is, it still speaks to Dylan’s consistent separation of the historic/cultural Bob Dylan and the private self. It’s a self so removed from the public that, as Dylan comments in 1978, it has no name: “Names are labels so we can refer to one another. But deep inside us we don’t have a name. We have no name” (Cott 206). “Transfiguration,” which we can also interpret as masking, deferring, ghosting, Dylan further explains, “is what allows you to crawl out from under the chaos and fly above it. That’s how I can still do what I do and write the songs I sing and just keep on moving” (Gilmore 46). It’s also by this method that Dylan improvises on the archetypal outlaw figure in order to present his “honest” cultural outlaw, one who breaks from social boundaries and conventional wisdom.

Dylan’s conception of the outlaw performer adds another dimension to Guthrie’s boundary-crossing performer, who’s “a mystery to everybody except to his own self,” living within a “big and terrible spirit” (*Born to Win* 126, 127). Sam Shepard, watching Dylan perform in 1975, characterizes Dylan in a similar manner, but with greater emphasis on the mystery and the way Dylan’s outlaw performance prompts the audience to evaluate the myth: “A strong recurring feeling I get from watching Dylan perform is the sense of him playing for Big Stakes . . . Dylan creates a mythic atmosphere out of the land around us. The land we walk on every day and never see until someone shows it to us” (*The Rolling Thunder Logbook* 63). Thus, rather than, as in Guthrie’s case (or Walt

Whitman's), the performer making a connection with the people by speaking for them, Dylan "moves into mysticism at the drop of an E-minor chord. Because his very identity is a mystery, he pushes the question of 'who' he is into 'what' he is" (Shepard, *The Rolling Thunder Logbook* 145). In other words, Dylan's outlaw persona prompts the audience to consider what an outlaw is, the individual essentials behind the myth, rather than who he really is. A curt summary of Dylan's and his subjects' outlaw personae is an oft-quoted Dylanism from "Absolutely Sweet Marie:" "[T]o live outside the law, you must be honest" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 233). This is not an issue of being a good man or bad man, as we saw in Guthrie's outlaws and those of his time. As Dylan tells Studs Terkel in a 1963 interview, "it seems like everything back then was good and bad and black and white and whatever, you only had one or two. . . . Nowadays . . . it doesn't seem so simple. There are more than two sides, it's not black and white anymore" (Cott 7). Dylan's outlaws are "honest" or promote self-honesty. They are instances of the Guthrie "good man," but their goodness is not in what they do so much as the honesty or integrity that constitutes the tension between their selves or the individual's self and their cultural personae. For Dylan, "Integrity is a facet of honesty. It has to do with knowing yourself" (Cott 79).

Critical consideration of Bob Dylan and the outlaw has been an element of Dylan commentary and biography from the beginning. Dylan's first biographer, Anthony Scaduto, writes, "Bob Dylan is an outsider, and he was an outsider even as a child. He is one of those outlaws who intuitively reject a standardized society, whose consciousness has not been frozen in the immediate and confining present" (Scaduto 17). Michael



Gray, author of the first major critical work on Dylan, *Song and Dance Man: The Art of Bob Dylan*, likewise characterizes Dylan's outlaw milieu in this manner: "Bob Dylan was never urging on us the unimportance of moral clarity. He was arguing that to achieve that clarity, the individual must shake off the hand-me-down conventional moral codes and the judgments we make thoughtlessly from them. He was pressing his generation to take the solo flight of responsibility for arriving at its own morality" (207). This has become the conventional characterization of Dylan's outlaw persona in the continuing flood of Dylan commentary. Yet, there have been few sustained considerations of Dylan's participation in the outlaw tradition. John J. Makay and Alberto Gonzalez's 1987 article, "Dylan's Biographical Rhetoric and the Myth of the Outlaw-Hero," is the most specific in this vein, contending "that Dylan's use of the myth of the outlaw hero builds his own ethos as an outsider loyal to American cultural systems who successfully criticizes out culture" (165). Stephen Scobie's *Alias Bob Dylan Revisited*, while not entirely focused on the outlaw in Dylan's work and performance, offers an extensive consideration of the outlaw/trickster persona and the way Dylan uses this persona under the shifting guise of Alias. This chapter picks up the various threads of conversation pertaining to Dylan's outlaw persona and the outlaws in his work in order to provide a fuller consideration of this foundational aspect of Dylan's art by considering how it emerged from the folk tradition of the outlaw and the old, weird America; how it demonstrates a continuity between the outlaw/trickster role of Dylan's persona and the outlaws he presents; how it recognizes that an outlaw thread runs

beyond songs specifically about outlaws to social and cultural outsiders; and how feeling, rather than fact, and honesty form the ethical core of Dylan's outlaw milieu.

### Portrait of a Musical Expeditionary: Developing the Dylan Myth

Bob Dylan's April 12, 1963 performance at Town Hall in New York City included many soon-to-be classic songs that would be released on his second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, a month later, including a song he composed a year to the day earlier, "Blowin' in the Wind." The song had already gained Dylan respect from the folk community, having been published in *Broadside* the previous year, but the national acclaim Dylan received as the song's composer wouldn't come until Peter, Paul and Mary reached #2 on the *Billboard* chart four months later with their cover of the song. By the time of the Town Hall concert, however, Dylan, as a songwriter and performer, had successfully created the public persona that he would cultivate for over fifty years.

The performance presents Dylan in a definitive moment of transition, leaving behind his apprenticeship to the folk tradition and culture of Greenwich Village and proceeding to improvise upon that tradition, breaking its rules. As Robert Shelton, who attended and reviewed the concert for the *New York Times*, observes, "[T]hat evening may have been the last Dylan concert that reminded listeners of his influences. From then on he could be compared only to himself. That night his hobo look evoked memories of Guthrie . . . However, Dylan broke all past songwriting and performing

rules” (164-65). In a comic bit, six songs into his twenty-four song set, Dylan tells the crowd,

I never use a list. I don’t much believe in lists, but I noticed most of the guitar players do have them now. And I wanted to get the best songs on my list, you see I didn’t wanna have none of these songs [an audience member shouts, “It’s a Hard Rain”] Oh, wow, alright, let me explain about my list first . . . Anyway, I copied down all the best songs I could find off of everybody else’s list. That’s why I’m in trouble, because some of these songs I don’t know too well. “Hard Rain” ain’t on my list. (“Town Hall”)

Aside from the humorous delivery and hayseed self-deprecation (hallmarks of Dylan’s early Chaplinesque performances), the real joke is that all but two of the songs were distinctly Dylan compositions. In fact, this was the first full-length concert he performed without a number of covers of traditional material he’d been picking up in his apprentice years. Many of the original songs clearly demonstrated Dylan’s indebtedness to past musical genres, which he even calls attention to, introducing “All Over You” with, “Here’s a 1930s ragtime tune I wrote last week” (“Town Hall”). There’s still also the distinct presence of Guthrie’s influence, particularly in the talking blues performances and the prose poem, “Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie,” Dylan recites at the close of the concert. The songs that would become classics, however, if the astute listener could pick out the traditional folk and blues melodies Dylan adapted for his own songs, eclipsed their predecessors soon after by the strength of the lyrics and his performance persona. People don’t hear the slave song “No More Auction Block” anymore when

Dylan sings “How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 53) They hear “Blowin’ in the Wind.” They don’t hear Child Ballad #12, “Lord Randall,” when he sings “Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 59). They hear “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.”

One of the earliest demos Bob Dylan cut for his first music publishing contract was “Poor Boy Blues.” It was February 1962, just over a year after Dylan left Minnesota for New York City and a month before his first album, *Bob Dylan*, was released. At this point, as Dylan remembers in *Chronicles*, “I didn’t have many songs, but I was making up some compositions on the spot, rearranging verses to old blues ballads, adding an original line here or there, anything that came into my mind—slapping a title on it” (227). In fact, his first album only contained two original songs, a tribute to Woody Guthrie, which used a Guthrie melody (“1913 Massacre”), and a talking blues, which was clearly Guthriesque and referenced “Pretty Boy Floyd” (“Now, a very great man once said / That some people rob you with a fountain pen”) (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 4). The songs he’d been writing were as indebted to the folk tradition as they were to the folk process, the process by which the likes of Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, Lead Belly, and Guthrie created new folk standards from old songs. “Poor Boy Blues” was obviously no different, tapping into the Poor Boy tradition. In the tune and delivery, there’s a suggestion of Bukka White’s “Po’ Boy,” but a more direct echo of Howlin’ Wolf’s “Smokestack Lightning,” from which Dylan lifted the first three of nine verses as well as the refrain, “Cain’t ya hear me cryin’?” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 15) Howlin’ Wolf

also lifted these verses from the blues tradition as well. Within the tradition, the intertextual iterations seem endless.

One verse of Dylan's song, however, shows a flash of the songwriter he was to become:

Ashes and diamonds,  
The difference I cain't see.  
Cain't ya hear me cryin'?  
Hm, hm, hm. (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 15)

The verse calls attention to itself among the typical floating blues verses like: "Hey, stop you ol' train, / Let a poor boy ride. / Cain't ya hear me cryin'?" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 15)

Dylan's original verse demonstrates his burgeoning symbolist sensibility (displayed more fully in "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," written about eight months later) and compulsion to improvise upon and interfuse popular culture and the modern cultural outlaw figure with the musical tradition of his performative apprenticeship. "Ashes and diamonds" is the key phrase here, carrying with it a culturally mnemonic force like Proust's *petites madeleines*, which, in some translations, Proust likens to a pilgrim's shell in shape (the shell, most recognizably, is associated with the pilgrimage route to St. James's—one of the three apostles who witnessed Jesus Christ's transfiguration—tomb at Santiago de Compostela)—the pilgrim figure an apt metaphor for a musical expeditionary's quest as well as Poor Boy's unending exile from home in search of some essential belonging, the strong sense of home vaguely remembered. "Ashes and diamonds," a phrase that expresses essentially the same thing as the pilgrim *madeleine*: a

lost past, ashes of memory transfigured into a stronger sense of what's gone, more vivid than the immediate experience. Dylan's Poor Boy, however, can't see the difference between the two, can't quite escape the liminal purgatory, physically reflected in the last verse: "Mississippi River, / You a-runnin' too fast for me. / Can't ya hear me cryin'?" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 15)

As symbolically evocative as Dylan's "ashes and diamonds" phrase is, one of the original lines he adds "here or there" amidst traditional lyrics, its iterations also resonate outside the folk tradition, revealing even more about Dylan's outlaw milieu. In May of 1961, *Ashes and Diamonds*, a Polish film originally released in 1958, was released in America.<sup>35</sup> While there's no record that Dylan saw the movie, it seems more than coincidence that this phrase would appear in one of his songs less than a year later, and living in Greenwich Village at the time, Dylan (an avid moviegoer) would've had the opportunity to see it. Two aspects of the movie resonate with the shaping of Dylan's cultural outlaw figure. The first is the source of the movie's title, which is referenced in the movie, a recited excerpt of a poem by Cyprian Norwid:

So often, are you as a blazing torch with flames  
Of burning rags falling about you flaming,  
You know not if flames bring freedom or death.  
Consuming all that you must cherish

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<sup>35</sup> The film takes place in Poland on the day the Nazis surrendered (May 8, 1945). Maciek and Andrzej, Home Army soldiers, have orders to assassinate a high-ranking communist. Over the course of the day, Maciek falls in love with a barmaid and considers not carrying out his assignment and giving up his violent, drifting life. Because he would be considered a deserter if he doesn't do as ordered, Maciek is compelled to assassinate the communist.

If ashes only will be left, and want Chaos and tempest

Or will the ashes hold the glory of a starlike diamond. (*Ashes and Diamonds*)

The excerpt expresses the central tension that Dylan would develop more fully in “Like a Rolling Stone,” the social and cultural exile resulting from self-examination that presents the possibility of freedom: an experience Dylan once described as “swimming in lava” (Siegel 39). But in 1962, Dylan’s Poor Boy, like the “you” of Norwid’s poem “know[s] not,” can’t see what lies at the end of his exile (*Ashes and Diamonds*). With allusions to Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1953) and the lead actor’s (Zbigniew Cybulski) conscious James Dean-like performance, *Ashes and Diamonds* also speaks to Dylan’s identification with the new postwar cultural outlaw, an extension of his childhood fascination with classic outlaws. Dean in particular was an obsession for Dylan as a teen. When *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) opened in Hibbing, he saw the film at least four times. Leroy Hoikkola, the drummer in Dylan’s second rock and roll band (The Golden Chords), remembers, “We idolized [James Dean] as a person and an actor. We felt, including Bob, that his acting was actually himself. He wasn’t just acting the roles he was in. The roles were him” (Scaduto 9-10). The personal investment in a role and the feeling/honesty of Dean’s persona represent essential traits of Dylan’s development of his own performative outlaw persona as well as traits he invests in his outlaw subjects.

Dylan’s “Poor Boy Blues,” while certainly reflecting the essence of the Poor Boy tradition with its sense of homelessness and the looming presence of “the law,” demonstrates, in manner of composition, Dylan’s musical search for his own voice,

performance style, and persona. Robert Zimmerman certainly had not come from a background similar to Poor Boy's experience, but the part of him that became Bob Dylan, the persona, when he moved to Minneapolis in 1959 to "attend" the University of Minnesota could relate, questing for a mythical/musical home as a performing artist: "I was a musical expeditionary. I had no past really to speak of, nothing to go back to, nothing to lean on" (*No Direction Home*). For Dylan, the quest for the mythical home he set out on when he left his family home in Hibbing has been a never-ending process, as he recalls the start of his expedition nearly half a century later:

I had ambitions to set out and find, like an odyssey, goin' home somewhere. I set out to find somewhere this home that I'd left a while back and couldn't remember exactly where it was, but I was on my way there. And encountering what I encountered on the way was how I envisioned it all. I didn't really have any ambition at all. I was born very far from where I was supposed to be, so I'm on my way home. (*No Direction Home*).

Clearly, Dylan is speaking metaphorically, giving the quest for self-definition a mythical air. Even less mythical-sounding expressions of this homeless feeling are more metaphor than fact, as when he tells Robert Shelton, "I never was a kid who could go home. I never had a home, which I could just take a bus to. I made my way all by myself" (Shelton 41). This homelessness was an early element of the Dylan myth he cultivated, claiming that he ran away from home a number of times (as early as at the age of seven) or lived with several nameless foster families, telling tales of Guthriesque rambles (even claiming he met Guthrie in California when he was fourteen), working carnivals, and



meeting obscure folk musicians like Mance Lipscomb in his travels. According to Dylan's mother, these folk tales of his past and the stark portrait he paints of his hometown early in his career were, as Dylan explained to her, "just to help him in his image" (Thompson 159). And as John Gibbens observes, Dylan's mythification of his past was less about revoking that past and more about creating a mythic space from which his performative personae could emerge: "The important thing was not that he should be from somewhere other than where he came from, but that he should be from nowhere in particular" (4). This nowhere, however, carried with it a distinct American outlaw milieu, a tradition Dylan purposely mined in the making of his persona. When Dylan speaks of his homelessness, unquestionably rooted in a specific tradition, it certainly has less to do with the physical home. It's more of a feeling of home as a place through which one can express one's inner-self. Homelessness is part of Dylan's feeling of "home," and the quest is almost more important than the destination. Home, for Dylan, is a performative expression.

Rock and roll was losing much of its cultural force—its disruptive edge—in the late 1950s. As critics often note, many of its iconic figures were disappearing from the scene: Little Richard retired to become a preacher in 1957, Elvis enlisted in the army a year later, Buddy Holly died in a plane crash the next year. In the spring of 1958, these three performers, especially Little Richard, embodied the performative expression in which Robert Zimmerman felt most at home. On a home recording from this time, young Bobby cites Little Richard as having "a lot of expression" and faults Johnny Cash, whom Dylan would later admire, befriend, and record with, for lack of expression. He

also attempts to explain to a friend why he thinks rhythm and blues music is the best: it's "something that you really can't explain . . . when you hear it's a good rhythm and blues song, chills go up your spine" ("John Bucklen Tape"). As he would throughout his career, here Dylan characterizes performative expression/reception as an inner/personal experience, something felt that can't be explained fully by performer or audience.

The summer before his senior year at Hibbing High School, Dylan tried on his first stage name, Elston Gunn, performing as front man for his short-lived rock and roll band, the Shadow Blasters. A year later, Robert Zimmerman, as a solo acoustic performer making the rounds at folk clubs and parties in Dinkytown (Minneapolis's bohemian area at the time), became Bob Dylan in earnest, cultivating the persona mythically and musically. This metamorphosis of a rock and roll hopeful, who vowed to follow Little Richard in his senior yearbook, into a fully-invested folk musician, who idolized Woody Guthrie, might seem incongruous, but it's clear that it wasn't the genre of music, but the feeling evoked that mattered most to Dylan. Hank Williams, Lead Belly, and Odetta were early influences; the latter, as Dylan has attested a number of times, inspired him to trade in his electric for an acoustic guitar. And the mythic figure of Guthrie soon loomed large, having such an effect on him that, after *really* listening to Guthrie records, Dylan felt illuminated: "I felt like I had discovered some essence of self-command, that I was in the internal pocket of the system feeling more like myself than ever before" (*Chronicles* 244).

For Robert Zimmerman, Dinkytown was an opportune place to begin the process of developing an outlaw persona; as Dylan remembers, "Most of everybody . . . you had

the feeling that they'd just been kicked out of something. It was outside, there was no formula, never was 'main stream' . . . America was still very 'straight,' 'post-war' . . . McCarthy, commies, puritanical, very claustrophobic and what ever was happening of any real value was happening away from that and sort of hidden from view" (*Biograph* 5). It was nowhere, outlaw territory, for a kid coming from a prototypical Midwestern background, a perfect place for an alias that was just as unstable, mining the greater Nowhere, America tradition. Paul Nelson, a Dinkytown acquaintance of Dylan remembers, "What impressed us all most was how fast Bob changed. Every few weeks, Bob would become a different person with a different style" (Shelton 73). This observation could describe Dylan's entire career, but at this point, it's evident that he's still attempting to find the right performative mask. Another friend, Gretel Hoffman, remembers Dylan's explicit cultivation of a performance identity: "He was very open about it. He explained that he was building a character" (Shelton 74). Tony Glover's memory reveals just how invested Dylan became in the role he developed: "He said it was an act, but only for about two days. He said, 'After that, it was me'" (Shelton 75).

After dropping out of school and moving to Greenwich Village in January of 1961 Dylan's process of invention continued. The Village folk scene offered Dylan the quintessential stage for what many have characterized as an uncannily quick rise to prominence. Dave Van Ronk's remembrance of first seeing Dylan perform during this time is an apt summary of Dylan's outlaw attitude behind this oft-told tale. Dylan, he said, is "a cat who seems to know all the rules and systematically breaks them. He gave the appearance of not knowing anything, but you could just feel he knew what it was all

about, and he was deliberately breaking the rules and making it work” (Scaduto 70).

Robert Shelton’s laudatory *New York Times* review of Dylan’s first major engagement at Gerde’s Folk City in September of 1961 also highlights his distinctive performance style while giving a portrait of a persona in the making: “Mr. Dylan’s highly personalized approach toward folk song is still evolving. He has been sopping up influence like a sponge. At times, the drama he aims at is off-target melodrama and his stylization threatens to topple over as mannered excess” (Shelton 111). By the time of his 1963 Town Hall concert, Dylan’s mythic and performance persona came into its own, setting him apart from the rest of the folk community.

As a musical expeditionary, rules and boundaries meant little to Dylan, and yet they meant everything because he set himself against them with the same force that a conventional performer and the folk purists of the time tried to embody them. Dylan’s outlaw attitude, honesty in relation to self expression rather than rules, resulted in his break from the static folk tradition shaped by the community he was a part of in his apprentice years. As Dylan explains, “Folk Music was a strict and rigid establishment. If you sang Southern Mountain Blues, you didn’t sing Southern Mountain Ballads and you didn’t sing City Blues . . . It was really pathetic. . . . Everybody had their particular thing that they did. I didn’t much ever pay attention to that” (*Biograph* 8). Thus, his comic bit during the Town Hall concert about copying songs from other performers’ lists was not only a self-deprecating/ironic joke, but it was also a critique of the rigidity of the early 1960s folk establishment from which he was setting himself apart. In 1963, however, as he marked his singularity at Town Hall, the folk community began hailing him as a

major voice of that community and tradition. Two years later, at the Newport Folk Festival, the same outlaw attitude in his performance that set him apart elicited quite the opposite response from the community he helped make a cultural force.

### I Just Might Tell You the Truth: Outlaw Blues out on Highway 61

Newport Folk Festival, 1965: Bob Dylan massacres the audience with a hot electric machine gun; such is the scene rendered in Todd Haynes' 2007 Dylan biopic, *I'm Not There*. As outlandish as this representation of the historic moment Dylan "went electric" seems, it symbolically captures the cultural force of Dylan's outlaw act as well as the essence of the honest man outlaw role fully realized in "Like a Rolling Stone." Also released in 2007, Murray Lerner's documentary, *The Other Side of the Mirror: Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival*, offers a concise portrait of Dylan's development over the course of his three Newport appearances. The montage of performances from 1963-65 overwhelmingly demonstrates his emergence from the folk tradition. There are four moments that stand out symbolically as a narrative of his transition: 1) Dylan performs "North Country Blues" during a 1963 afternoon workshop session. He looks like a cross between Woody Guthrie and James Dean as he performs in earnest his ballad of the iron ore country from which he came. Behind him sit a number of older musicians listening intently, including Clarence Ashley, whose rendition of "The Cuckoo Bird" (included in Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*) with its other-worldly claw-

hammer banjo and high lonesome singing epitomizes the voice of the old weird, America. During this moment, Dylan appears to be emerging from the folk tradition. 2) At the close of his evening performance in 1964, a looser, beatnik-looking Dylan walks off stage to the roar of applause. In fact, the crowd is so loud in calling for Dylan's return that the emcee is unable to introduce the following act, Odetta, the very person that, Dylan claims, "turned me on to folk singing" (Cott 204). By this time, Dylan had eclipsed his influences. 3) There's a brief moment after Dylan finishes performing for a frenzied crowd at an afternoon workshop in 1965 and gets into a van surrounded by fans knocking on windows and calling to him when the expression on his face seems both dazed and weary. It's as if in those few seconds the weight of his cultural role has been felt for the first time. 4) Finally, the infamous 1965 electric set, during which he performs "Like a Rolling Stone" (released as a single five days prior) live for the first time, receiving a crowd response mixed of confusion, cheers, and booing.

Dylan's shift from playing traditional folk music and paying tribute to an influence like Guthrie in "Song to Woody" to redefining the tradition and synergizing, rather than imitating, Guthrie on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* is apparent in his rewriting of traditional folk songs and use of Guthriesque sing/talk phrasings on the recordings and in the jacket notes. Commenting on "Blowin' in the Wind," Dylan channels Guthrie as he defines true criminality: "I still say that some of the biggest criminals are those that turn their heads away when they see wrong and know it's wrong" ("Jacket Notes" *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*). Yet, even if the phrasing is similar to Guthrie's, there is a sense that Dylan is considering criminality more on the

individual level rather than the collective. It is not just that the criminal *does* wrong. It's that he or she knows what's wrong and doesn't act. True criminality, in this case, is purely an individual choice for which only the self is accountable. Those who can ignore the problem are simply not being honest to themselves or the role they play in society. Later that year, Dylan critiques American society in general for a criminal lack of honesty: "Ain't nobody can say anything honest in the United States. Every place you look is cluttered with phoneys and lies" (Shelton 192). The "protest" songs (Dylan preferred to call them "finger pointing" songs) that Dylan wrote during the first few years of his career, although appearing on the surface to be a general critique of American society, went beyond the circumstances to the heart of the matter: self-evaluation (as an individual and society), honesty, and telescoping the universal to a personal level. Bob Dylan would emerge from the role of the good man representative outlaw that Guthrie's legacy had spawned in the folk revival of the fifties and sixties to turn the concerns of the folk outlaw inward in order to preserve individual and aesthetic freedom. In doing so, Dylan continued to evoke Guthrie's concern for the oppressed, but emphasized the need for individuals to break free from societal constraints. For Bob Dylan, the role of the folk outlaw was not to provide answers, but to pose questions. While "Blowin' in the Wind" might first come to mind with its nine rhetorical questions, the question that exemplifies the concern of the honest man outlaw is: "How does it feel?"

As Dylan explains in *Chronicles*, "Protest songs are difficult to write without making them come off preachy and one-dimensional. You have to show people a side of

themselves that they didn't know was there" (54). To be effective, they need to prompt the audience to honestly contemplate their feeling and personal stake in an issue.

Dylan's most poignant example of this rhetorical strategy is "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," a song that humanizes the victim of a racially-charged crime to the point that tears are shed for the injustice that the individual, Hattie Carroll, suffered and not the racist environment that precipitated her death. In *Chronicles*, Dylan demonstrates his method of focusing on the social outlaw as an individual rather than just a representative in order to make a larger statement, as Guthrie often did. When he was learning the ropes in Greenwich Village, Dylan fantasized about rewriting "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night" (a 1930 poem by Alfred Hayes put to music in 1936 by Earl Robinson) because, he thought, it was a one-dimensional protest song that failed to capture what was important about Joe Hill's story, namely Joe Hill himself. Instead, the song focused on Hill the IWW troubadour, activist, and sometime tramp, as a labor martyr, a figure and spirit to rally around in the fight for fair and safe working conditions. Granted, this was exactly what Hill wanted in the end, as he wrote IWW leader Bill Haywood, "I will die like a true-blue rebel. Don't waste any time in mourning—organize" (Adler 325). Dylan, however, valued Hill's honesty to his convictions—protecting the honor of a mystery woman who could have provided an alibi that would clear Hill of the murder charge he faced and challenging the law to prove he was guilty (which the authorities never actually did)—so steadfastly that he faced a firing squad on the strength of those convictions. Dylan "would have immortalized him in a different way—more like Casey Jones or Jesse James" (*Chronicles* 54). But he never did write a song specifically for



Hill, who, in his final will-poem, characterizes himself as a “rolling stone” (Adler 338). Instead, he wrote a song for Woody Guthrie on the same principle, and later, he refined the core concern of this principle—honestly facing a side of one’s self that was/is clouded by social and cultural constraints—in “Like a Rolling Stone.”

The same impulse that caused Dylan to re-imagine “Joe Hill” in a way that expressed something about himself led him to begin writing and performing his own songs. By 1964, he was performing only original songs, ones which still bore the reverance of the folk tradition he was disrupting, but were increasingly more complex and personalized. A little over a month before Dylan played his second Newport Folk Festival in July, this time as a hip cultural icon whose songwriting—evidenced in new songs like “Chimes of Freedom” and “Mr. Tambourine Man”— evolved far past the topical songs he performed a year earlier, he commented on his move away from performing traditional songs: “I don’t care how great an old song it is or what its tradition is. I have to make a new song out of what *I* know and out of what *I’m* feeling” (Cott 26). In 1965, Dylan released his fifth album, *Bringing It All Back Home*, comprised of new songs that clearly demonstrate the feeling of homelessness, the “odyssey, goin’ home somewhere,” he describes forty years later (*No Direction Home*).

Despite its title, *Bringing It All Back Home* has little to do with home. Rather, the songs are about outlaw territory, being unsettled, alienation, and homelessness. The album is purgatorial, ranging from sardonic to comic to surreally serious to transcendent and liberating placelessness. The album begins in the basement and ends with a vagabond at the front door, calling for Baby Blue to leave home for the highway to

nowhere. What occurs between these images is, on the first side of the album, a picaresque absurdist tramp through American society and history, and, on the second side, a surreal, subconscious wandering through the abstract and grotesqued ideals that structure American culture. Throughout this odyssey is the figure of the outlaw as both Virgilian guide and Dantean pilgrim in the guise of cultural joker and thief, the two sides of the outlaw trickster. Even the two songs about love on the first side of album, addressed to more of an artistic muse than a real person, exist in lawless or homeless, sublime purgatory: the muse of “She Belongs to Me” has “no place to fall” and is “nobody’s child / The Law can’t touch her at all,” while the muse of “Love Minus Zero/No Limit” is untouched by limits and “knows too much to argue or to judge,” representing an asymptotic existence that creates its own authority (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 163, 167).

The opening song, “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” in the tradition of outlaw literary figures like Dostoevsky’s underground man, Ellison’s invisible man, and Kerouac’s Leo Percepied, presents an outcast as social commentator, and from the start it’s clear that the society he critiques is just as flawed as he’s approached by “the law,” a “man in the trench coat / badge out, laid off . . . Wants to get paid off” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 164). From this point, the lyric-narrative shifts to second person, structurally drawing the listener into this outcast’s worldview. By the end, this subterranean advises retreat back underground to avoid the barrage of social restraints or “hang-ups” upon freedom: “Get dressed, get blessed / Try to be a success / Please her, please him, buy gifts / Don’t steal, don’t lift / Twenty years of schoolin’ / And they put you on the day

shift / Look out kid / They keep it all hid / Better jump down a manhole / light yourself a candle” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 164). Or, more to the point, “DIG YOURSELF,” if we take a cue from the opening scene of *Don’t Look Back*, in which he substitutes this piece of advice for the last “Look out kid” in the famous cue card sequence. And this is a “homesick blues” that assaults “you” to the point that the issue isn’t homesickness—far from nostalgia—but sickness of the socially-constructed home, turning “Poor Boy Blues” on its head, claiming that liminal space of not being able to see the difference between ashes and diamonds—both are useless to the cultural outcast—as the only place one can be free. “i accept chaos,” Dylan writes in the album’s jacket notes, summing up the honesty of this purgatorial outlaw existence, “i am not sure whether it accepts me” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 182).

The counterpart to this sick-of-home blues, “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” appears on the second side of the album, performed in a similar—though wearier—vocal assault of words with the phrases/lines metrically a touch longer, intensifying the barrage of social construction on “you.” But after three stanzas, in the first chorus, the narrator speaks up from somewhere underneath the “darkness at the break of noon” that shadows the increasingly stilted individual, rhythmically slowing down the pace just enough for a sigh to release the weary tension: “So don’t fear if you hear / A foreign sound to your ear / It’s alright, Ma, I’m only sighing” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 176). Who is Ma and why does the narrator’s sigh sound foreign to her? If Ma is like either of the mother figures encountered in “On the Road Again” or “Maggie’s Farm” (both on the first side of the album), particularly Maggie’s “ma” who “talks to all the

servants / About man and God and law” and absurdly claims she’s forty-four years younger than she actually is, then this more serious version of Ma, on one level, stands for corrupt or dishonest authority (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 166). On another level, Ma represents the home from which the narrator throughout the album exiles himself or the homes he encounters (like Maggie’s) that are anything but welcoming, prompting, in the case of “On the Road Again,” an incredulous reply, “Then you ask why I don’t live here / Honey, I can’t believe that you’re for real” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 169). The speaker’s sigh is foreign to this domestic authority in “It’s Alright, Ma” because the speaker is declaring his independence from it all, presuming to give Ma a piece of advice at the same moment that he placates her worry that he’s not conforming, as in the second of five choruses: “An’ though the rules of the road have been lodged / It’s only people’s games that you got to dodge / And it’s alright, Ma, I can make it” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 177). This is the postwar version of Tom Joad; detaching himself from the one big soul—here, the “rat race choir”—under the authority of “society’s pliers” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 178). Finally, in the last verse, the narrator identifies himself as a social outlaw, symbolically breaking free of social handcuffs and declaring, in the following chorus, “And if my thought-dreams could be seen / They’d probably put my head in a guillotine / But it’s alright, Ma, it’s life, and life only” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 178). The only course of action, then, suggested by the following song, “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” is to take to the highway.

Four of the eleven songs that make up *Bringing It All Back Home* address an archetypal or symbolic subject, each representing a stage of development in the outlaw

social drama/ritual that unfolds over the course of the album. In “Subterranean Homesick Blues” there’s the initiate into outlaw territory, “kid,” and in “It’s Alright, Ma” there’s Ma implicitly addressed by a much wiser kid who participates in the liminal aspect of this social ritual, wherein the initiate challenges social laws. As Victor Turner argues, after the initiate passes through this liminal space, he or she is reintegrated into society, the rite of passage completed. What we have here, however, is an outlaw social ritual where the initiate isn’t reintegrated, but set free by choosing to remain in a liminal existence. This process is suggested by the other two songs of direct address, “Mr. Tambourine Man” and “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” which open and close the second side of the album, respectively.

Dylan began writing “Mr. Tambourine Man” while participating in a popular social ritual, Mardi Gras, in 1964, and clearly, the symbolic liminal existence of cultural lawlessness and freedom that Mardi Gras represents contributed to Dylan’s transcendent invocation of the muse. On one level, Mr. Tambourine Man represents a performative aesthetic that strives toward a Truth that can never be fully realized:

And if you hear vague traces of skippin’ reels of rhyme  
To your tambourine in time, it’s just a ragged clown behind,  
I wouldn’t pay it any mind, it’s just a shadow you’re  
Seein’ that he’s chasing. (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 172)

The speaker chases the truth of Mr. Tambourine Man’s performance, characterizing himself as a ragged clown attempting to put into words, make a song of, the tambourine rhythm he hears, but can only chase a shadow (i.e. behind the tambourine’s time, only a

memory of the original sound). On another level, in the context of the whole album, “Mr. Tambourine Man” is the only song entirely removed from the social world (granted, it was written months before the rest of the songs), implicitly suggesting that true freedom of self expression exists in a liminal space of pure, honest feeling and experience where “memory and fate [are] driven deep beneath the wave,” where past and future have no bearing on existence, where time doesn’t exist (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 173). In “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” the speaker instructs Baby Blue to set out for such a place, an odyssey toward some unattainable home where past and future are rendered meaningless, to “leave your stepping stones behind, something calls for you. / Forget the dead you’ve left, they will not follow you” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 179). The song “is an appeal,” argues Aidan Day, “to re-identify with a principle of identity that refuses settlement and control” (80). And in this process, which “emphasize[s] the creative and positive potential of abandonment to spaces of unmapped, unwritten possibility,” the album comes full circle; where the “kid” of “Subterranean Homesick Blues” is advised to “light yourself a candle,” Baby Blue (another “kid” initiate) is similarly advised to “strike another match, go start anew” (Day 81; *Lyrics 1962-1985* 164, 179).

Again, as in “It’s Alright, Ma,” it’s made clear, leading up to this final prompt to freedom, that this is an outlaw freedom and existence, an ambivalent homelessness on a symbolic highway occupied by vagabonds, gamblers, and “your orphan with his gun:” outlaw territory (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 179). The album’s alienation from home, the sick-of-homeness, is clearly equated with an outlaw feeling, suggested by “Outlaw Blues,” a seemingly inconsequential song that curtly provides the essence of this feeling and

forecasts Dylan's increasing outlaw feeling as a performer in the months to come. "Ain't gonna hang no picture, / Ain't gonna hang no picture frame," declares the outlaw, "Well, I might look like Robert Ford / But I feel like a Jesse James" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 168). Technically, both Ford and James were outlaws, but as we know from the often told tale, Ford shot James in the back while he was hanging a picture. Subsequently, Ford became famous for killing James, touring around the country and re-enacting his deed in the immediate years. However, Ford's fame quickly turned to infamy and he would forever be known as "that dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard" (Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* 129). At the root of Dylan's Ford/James metaphor is honesty. What could be more dishonest than a fellow outlaw, or even worse, someone who wore the false mask of a friend, shooting another in the back, especially after "he ate of Jesse's bread, and he slept in Jesse's bed?" (Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* 129) Additionally, Dylan, surely aware of Ford's performances, uses the outlaw tale as a metaphor for his own performance of the outlaw role as well as demonstrating the distinction between outward appearance and inward feeling, suggested in the fourth verse: "I got my dark sunglasses, / I'm carryin' for good luck my black tooth. / Don't ask me nothin' about nothin', / I just might tell you the truth" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 168). Soon after, this outlaw unloosed his tongue and made good on his threat on Dylan's next album, *Highway 61 Revisited*.

As promised to Baby Blue, this symbolic highway is full of social outlaws, gamblers, grotesques, mystery tramps, burlesqued historical figures; approximately seventy different characters appear along Highway 61. As in the previous album,

American culture and society is unveiled, but this unveiling happens deeper in outlaw territory where the speaker doesn't *tell* us about an oppressive society, but *shows* us this shadow America stripped of its authority. Essentially *Highway 61 Revisited* is Dylan's first sustained glimpse into the old, weird America, a precursor to what Greil Marcus call's Dylan's Invisible Republic, represented in the basement tapes recorded in Woodstock two years later. The album makes the accepted world weird, uncanny, carnivalesque, exhibiting the tension between settled American society and outlaws, such as in "Ballad of a Thin Man," where it's the outsiders that judge with authority:

You hand in your ticket  
And you go watch the geek  
Who immediately walks up to you  
When he hears you speak  
And says, "How does it feel  
To be such a freak?" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 198)

This uncanny world culminates in Dylan's Beat version of *The Waste Land*, "Desolation Row." In a 1966 interview Dylan jokes that if he were president, "school children, instead of memorizing *America the Beautiful*, would have to memorize *Desolation Row*" (Cott 111). He also claims that he would "immediately rewrite" the national anthem (Cott 111). A viable candidate for this new anthem to accompany "Desolation Row" ("America the Grotesque") would have to be "Like a Rolling Stone."

Writing "Like a Rolling Stone," Dylan says, was a breakthrough: "I didn't care anymore after that about writing books or poems or whatever. I mean it was something



that I myself could dig. It's very tiring having other people tell you how much they dig you if you yourself don't dig you" (Cott 97). "Like a Rolling Stone" addresses those exiled from the American Dream, those now outlawed from the fairytale: "Once upon a time you dressed so fine / You threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 191) The subject is now on the other side of that dime, perhaps even on the nickel (slang for skid row), having to live on the street, scrounge for meals, commune with the "mystery tramp" and "Napoleon in rags"—social outlaws, "complete unknown[s]" excluded from the benefits and protection of the law (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 191-2). At first glance, "Like a Rolling Stone" doesn't appear to attribute the same positive potential of the outlaw position demonstrated in "Mr. Tambourine Man" or "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," especially if we consider the particularly vituperative performances from Dylan's 1966 World Tour. In fact, in a 1966 interview Dylan described the initial composition of the song as "this long piece of vomit," "a rhythm thing on paper all about my steady hatred, directed at some point that was honest" (Marcus, *Like a Rolling Stone* 70; Siegel 39). The key word here is "honest." Dylan, while suggesting his words flowed from him with brutal candor, perhaps is also implying the "honesty"—the reality of life stripped of illusion—thrust upon the outlawed subject, which also necessitates honesty in living this role if one is to survive.

Dylan recorded "Absolutely Sweet Marie" and its most memorable line, "[T]o live outside the law, you *must* be honest" (aptly an aphoristic summary of Dylan's conception of the outlaw role at this time), about nine months after "Like a Rolling Stone" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 233, my emphasis). Honesty certainly is not a requirement for

living inside the law (as we saw in Guthrie's commentary) and apparently the "You" of "Like a Rolling Stone" was never honest while residing in accepted social law: "get[ting] juiced in" school, buying alibis, and "letting other people get your kicks for you" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 191). In essence, "the law" in Dylan's work is rife with dishonesty—it almost promotes it—but instead of focusing on the outward effect of this dishonesty, Dylan examines its effect as self-deception. The speaker in "Like a Rolling Stone" makes this self-deception clear to the subject, which is why Dylan comments to Jules Siegel, "In the end it wasn't hatred, it was telling someone something they didn't know, telling them they were lucky" (39). That steady stream of honesty directed at the subject and the honesty it takes to live outside the law results in finally being able to be honest to one's self, to be free of societal constraints. Dylan's preoccupation with truth and honesty grew more intense as his fame became greater. Soon after he spoke to Siegel about the honesty involved in writing "Like a Rolling Stone," Dylan delved deeper into the issue of honesty, speaking to an Australian actress/reporter on the first leg of his World Tour. As she paraphrases:

He was saying he could be cruel [i.e. tell the bare truth]—we should all be cruel—to show someone what was wrong with her life. . . . [H]e was interested in Self, and this is where truth lay—he wasn't preaching to anyone, just telling them what he had discovered. . . . he had come to know that he must go back inside himself, that everything that happens comes out of reexamination and sort of drowning with your spirituality and your sensitivity. You go down into the deeper self and go through it all and come out the other side. (Scaduto 237)

This freedom and honesty to the self should not be confused with Polonius' empty maxim, "To thine own self be true." A better, Dylanesque maxim would be: "Don't deceive yourself, kid. To thine own self be brutally honest." Before the last chorus of "Like a Rolling Stone"—which asks "You," "How does it feel / To be on your own / With no direction home" in a mood both as confrontational as the geek (in "Ballad of a Thin Man") asking, "How does it feel / to be such a freak?" and as transcendent as Baby Blue being prompted to make a new start—the closing lines of the last verse sum up this honest self-examination: "When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose / You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 192). Again, this might sound like a putdown, but it's also liberation for the individual. The line is full of ambiguity and captures the ambivalence of an outlaw existence. As Greil Marcus notes, the song is meant to leave you "[c]onfused—and justified, exultant, free from history with a world to win" (*Like a Rolling Stone* 128). When you're an outlaw, there is no need to conceal anything—perhaps other than your identity from the law—you can—*must*—be honest with yourself, and this is the benefit of assuming the outlaw role: freedom.

A week after Dylan performed his notorious set at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival—which included a chaotic "Maggie's Farm," a seemingly unsure and searching, but earnest "Like a Rolling Stone," a raucous "Phantom Engineer" (an early version of "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry"), and rushed, but poignant performances of "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" and "Mr. Tambourine Man"—Robert Shelton comments, Dylan "still seemed stunned and distressed that he had sparked such

animosity” (304). What he experienced at Newport was only the beginning of the animosity he would face in the coming months, but “over and over again,” Dylan could only comment to Shelton, “It was honest. It was honest” (304).

### Never Known to Hurt an Honest Man: The Honest Outlaw from Archetype to Cultural Type

As Clinton Heylin notes, Dylan made his first attempt to write a classic outlaw ballad in 1962 with “Rambling, Gambling Willie” (*Revolution in the Air* 68). Willie, however, unlike the subjects of classic outlaw ballads like “Jesse James” or “Pretty Boy Floyd,” was not a real person. Willie, like Dylan’s Poor Boy, is a pastiche culled from the folk tradition. Dylan plays with the outlaw archetype to construct Willie as a Robin Hood—although there’s no mention of Willie committing any crimes—and incorporates facts from other outlaws’ stories, particularly John Henry (Willie “gambled in the White House”) and Wild Bill Hickok who, like Willie, was shot in the head during a poker game holding two pair, “aces backed with eights” (known as the dead man’s hand) (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 11, 12). Willie bears all the earmarks of the classic outlaw, including his unsettledness; if it isn’t clear enough by the title that Willie is a rambler, the opening verse punctuates this fact by informing us that “he had twenty-seven children, yet he never had a wife” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 11). “Rambling, Gambling Willie,” however, didn’t make the final cut for Dylan’s second album, and Dylan wouldn’t write another

“classic” outlaw ballad until five years later with “John Wesley Harding,” after he’d fully developed a deep sense of the essential honest outlaw qualities that played a significant part in his exploration of the tension between society and the non-conforming individual.

In August of 1967, Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* was released, and it initially received as much cultural backlash as Dylan’s electric performances from late 1965-66. It was too graphically violent (especially the bloody ending) and sexually explicit a tale with—what we might infer from reviews critiquing the main characters—outlaws that didn’t fit the stereotype. But just as Dylan’s new music would go on to be a major influence on the direction of popular music, Penn’s movie would influence the direction of crime or outlaw/western films thereafter, such as Peckinpah’s *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), in which Dylan played a small, but magnetic part and for which he provided the soundtrack. The outlaws presented in *Bonnie and Clyde* certainly weren’t stereotypical, and neither were the prototypes for this new kind of outlaw found in Penn’s Billy the Kid movie, *The Left Handed Gun* (1958), and Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar* (1954). In Penn’s movies, particularly, there’s a tension between the creation of the outlaw myth and the individuals’ feelings and impulse toward establishing a “normal” life, with the myth overtaking the individuals in the end.

Soon after the release of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Dylan wrote and recorded his eighth album, *John Wesley Harding*, which, like Penn’s film, reevaluates the outlaw figure’s role as a socially moral exemplar that was prevalent during the Popular Front, presenting the outlaw figure in a more realistic (this doesn’t mean, however, historically accurate),

honest light. Dylan does so by disrupting the mythic and archetypal form of the folk outlaw. What is central in this disruption is the shift of focus on who or what an outlaw is to examining how we respond to the outlaw, what we take away from the story, i.e. learning something about ourselves we didn't know. Take, for instance, a comparison of the moral conclusions of Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd" and Dylan's "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" (from *John Wesley Harding*). Guthrie's good man outlaw ballad presents a straightforward moral of social critique: "Some will rob you with a six-gun, / And some with a fountain pen," and "You won't never see an outlaw, / Drive a family from their home" (*Every 100 Years* 83). Dylan's strange parable of two friends, Frankie Lee, the gambler, and Judas Priest, an archetype of false counsel (hence, "Judas" and "Priest"), provides an ironic three-part moral, in which trite platitudes (the first two parts) that really have nothing to do with the ballad actually serve to invigorate the last part of the moral, which, by itself, would have sounded equally as empty:

Well, the moral of this story,  
The moral of this song,  
Is simply that one should never be  
Where one does not belong.  
So when you see your neighbor carryin' somethin',  
Help him with his load,  
And don't go mistaking Paradise  
For that home across the road. (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 255)

In one sense, Dylan's moral structure critiques the moralization that accompanies classic outlaw types in story and song by making it an ironic joke, a condensing of the incondensable. It's difficult to say with certainty what the parable means, even if it can be summarized. Frankie Lee needs money and Judas Priest produces a roll of money, which causes Frankie Lee to contemplate whether or not he should accept the gift. As Judas Priest stares at him with "cold eyes" Frankie Lee says he can't make a decision with him staring like that, "It's just my foolish pride, / But sometimes a man must be alone / And this is no place to hide" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 253). With a wink, Judas Priest says he'll leave him alone, but prompts him to make a decision before he loses the opportunity, and tells Frankie Lee he can meet him down the road at "Eternity, / though you might call it 'Paradise'" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 253). Soon after he leaves, a stranger arrives and tells Frankie Lee that Judas Priest is stranded in a house down the road, which causes Frankie Lee to rush to his friend's aid. When he finds Judas Priest at the house (Priest informs him that it's not a house, but a home), which has twenty-four windows "and a woman's face in ev'ry one," Frankie Lee loses control of himself and "raves" for sixteen days until he collapses "into the arms of Judas Priest, / Which is where he died of thirst" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 254, 255).

Clearly, there's a wealth of symbolism in this tale, but to what end? The moralization after the gambler-outlaw Frankie Lee's death provides the key by calling attention to moral platitudes as social laws in general. Hearing the three-part moral causes us to reflect back on the ballad. In doing so, it becomes apparent that what Dylan condenses in this story is the morality and conventional wisdom that shape social law,

beginning with never lend money to friends—which we might infer, is why Frankie Lee feels the need to contemplate Judas Priest’s gift—and ending with an improvisation on “the grass is always greener” mentality, which Dylan reinterprets in this context to suggest that one doesn’t find answers to one’s problems by following another’s example. Here, too, there’s an echo of John Henry’s cautionary tale since Frankie Lee dies of thirst (John Henry asks for water before he dies), symbolically proving—if we interpret the house full of women as a bordello—that a man ain’t nothin’ but a man. In both cases, we have to wonder just who is benefitting from this proof, the individual or society.

In another sense, by this critique, this empty or false moralization is given a moral that has a deeper impact because we are prompted to interpret it ourselves instead of expecting to be told the moral. Thus, as the “little neighbor boy,” who accompanies Frankie Lee’s dead body to its resting place, mutters before the last verse with its moral summary, “Nothing is revealed,” it’s both a critique and a masked moral (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 255). Frankie Lee experiences no revelation. He doesn’t learn anything. Why? Many critics, like Stephen Scobie, suggests that “[b]etrayal of trust is a continuous theme throughout” the album—and perhaps rightly so on an album where ten out of its twelve songs feature outlaw figures—in light of Dylan’s preoccupation with the outlaw and betrayal of trust as we’ve seen clearly expressed in “Outlaw Blues” and “Absolutely Sweet Marie” (331 n 26). The balladeer himself betrays the trust of his audience by suggesting the presence of an allegory, but not delivering it in a conventional way, even misleading his audience. Certainly, Judas Priest’s name, too, implies such a betrayal, and the idea of “home” as an unreal paradise is implicitly a betrayal. But, nowhere in the



ballad does Judas Priest dictate Frankie Lee's decisions. Instead, Frankie Lee seems to act on impulse precisely because his friend gives him no moral direction, no laws to follow. In retrospect, and in the context of Dylan's honest outlaw figure, Frankie Lee's is a cautionary tale that reiterates a necessary self-honesty to live outside the law.

Thus, this album full of archetypal outlaws presents the uncertainty of an outlaw existence, a disruption of moral and social codes. Richard Goldstein's review of the album rightly describes the song as "abound[ing] with slaughtered platitudes," sacrificed for the possibility of transcendence (Shelton 391). The platitudes and morals are revealed as empty, and their authority is nullified in this outlaw territory. And yet, in the emptying of their authority they may also be reinvested with the authority of the honest outlaw type. Symbolically, Dylan wrote these songs after he emerged from "the basement" where he and his fellow subterraneans (members of The Band) journeyed deep into the old, weird America, creating, as Greil Marcus demonstrates in *Invisible Republic*, their own *Anthology of American Folk Music* that was never intended to be heard by the public. The songs written during the basement tape sessions, such as "Open the Door, Homer," similarly abound with slaughtered platitudes—"Take care of all your memories' / said my friend Mick / 'For you cannot relive them'"—and some imaginatively absurd ones as well—"ev'ryone / Must always flush out his house / If he don't expect to be / Goin' 'round housing flushes" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 320). "I Shall Be Released," also written during this time, explicitly calls attention to the relationship between moral platitudes and the outlaw figure. Sung from the perspective of a condemned man, the first two of three verses begin with "they say" and offer a piece of

conventional wisdom. Yet, the prisoner has a strong belief that he can transcend these social laws, as in the second verse, which echoes the stock definition of the outlaw being a person who is denied the protection of the law:

They say ev'ry man needs protection,  
They say ev'ry man must fall.  
Yet I swear I see my reflection  
Some place so high above the wall.  
I see my light come shining  
From the west unto the east.  
Any day now, any day now,  
I shall be released. (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 329)

Just as “It’s Alright, Ma” is a reimagining of Guthrie’s “Tom Joad,” these lines mark a reimagining, though more hopeful than the former, of “This Land Is Your Land” with the image of the wall and the sun shining, signaling a call to freedom from socially-constructed boundaries and morals. The condemned man’s hope marks an inner wisdom in contrast to these boundaries, something that Dylan, as he notes in *Chronicles*, believes the old, weird America, “a culture with outlaw women, super thugs, demon lovers and gospel truths . . . an invisible world that towered overhead with walls of gleaming corridors,” represents: “I felt right at home in this mythical realm made up not with individuals so much as archetypes, vividly drawn archetypes of humanity, metaphysical in shape, each rugged soul filled with natural knowing and inner wisdom . . . It was so real, so more true to life than life itself. It was life magnified” (236).

The jacket notes for *John Wesley Harding* include a story almost more elusive than “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest,” which once again gives it the appearance of a mock parable. The story presents a similar implied “moral” which, in the end, suggests that inner wisdom and natural knowing takes precedence over received knowledge in the search for truth. In the story, three “broken” kings (the first has a broken nose, the second has a broken arm, and the third is broke) are searching for the “key” to open “Mr. Dylan’s” new album. They decide that Frank is the key, so they pay a visit to Frank’s and Vera’s (his wife) home to seek counsel. Frank asks them, “And just how far would you like to go in?” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 266) “Not too far but just far enough so’s we can say that we’ve been there,” replies the first king (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 266). Frank obliges them and performs some absurd ritualistic gestures until the kings are satisfied. Soon after, the kings are back on the road and they’re no longer “broken,” their problems seemingly solved by Frank’s ritual. Yet, there’s no indication that Frank opened the album for them, and they walk away with empty comforts, never realizing that they missed the point: Frank *was* the key, not the man, but frankness, truth, honesty. It certainly isn’t a coincidence that, in Latin, Frank means “free man” and Vera means “true desire.”

This parable provides a key to the album’s ethical system, punctuated further by Frankie Lee’s tale, which implies that Frank-*ie* was once again the key, but he doesn’t realize it. “John Wesley Harding,” the album’s opening song, presents the ethical outlaw archetype, the honest man, through which this system is expressed. In the guise of a classic outlaw ballad like “Jesse James,” “John Wesley Harding” appears to be a simple

good man outlaw figure, another “friend to the poor” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 249). Unlike Dylan’s earlier attempt to write a good man outlaw ballad in “Rambling, Gambling Willie,” the subject of “John Wesley Harding” is an historic outlaw, except Dylan misspells his name (it’s supposed to be Hardin). John Wesley Hardin, however, was never really portrayed in this manner. In fact, he is often considered to be one of the “meaner” outlaws in legend. But songs based on real events, as Dylan comments in *Chronicles*, need not be factual, “You could usually find some kind of point of view in it, though, and take it for what it was worth, and the writer doesn’t have to be accurate, could tell you anything and you’re going to believe it” (82). Dylan poses “Jesse James,” in which James is portrayed as a friend to the poor, as an example: “By all accounts, though, James was a bloodthirsty killer who was anything but the Robin Hood sung about . . . But Billy Gashade [the presumed writer of the ballad] has the last word and he spins it around” (82). How and why, we might ask, does Dylan spin around Hardin’s story?

Dylan’s ballad notably does not present any specific information about its hero, much less the historic Hardin. Even “Jesse James” gleans some facts in its fiction. As Michael Gray notes, everything about the heroic deeds of Dylan’s Harding are empty claims. There is a “lack of what may be called ‘moral centre’”. Nine of the twelve lines provide what could be taken, at first glance, as testaments to the hero’s worth and virtue: yet actually none is free from significant ambiguity” (Gray 33). Thus, not only are specific details vague, but in each of the three verses, the lyrics point directly to the mythic construction of the outlaw via conventional wisdom and rumor: in verses one and

three, Harding “was never known,” and in verse two, “he was always known” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 249). What Gray interprets as a lack of moral center in the ambiguity of the outlaw’s deeds, however, is precisely what points to the moral center of the album, disrupting received knowledge, social code and wisdom, with the archetypal outlaw serving as catalyst to self honesty. In fact, the first verse symbolically presents John Wesley Harding as a “key,” like Frank, who “opened a many a door / But he was never known / To hurt an honest man” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 249). The latter part of this rumor suggests that whatever door, boundary, or threshold the outlaw (and the implicit freedom he represents) makes available, an honest man (in action and to himself) may pass through unscathed, but the self-deceiving or blindly-following man, like Frankie Lee (Judas Priest playing the outlaw role in this case), may pass through that door and die of thirst.

Dylan’s presentation of the outlaw figure as a key to freedom that often appears at some threshold or on the fringes of a scene (or society in general) distinctly resembles the mythic trickster figure. In “Like a Rolling Stone,” alone, there are two trickster representatives in addition to the stock jugglers and clowns doing tricks: the mystery tramp and Napoleon in rags. Stephen Scobie defines Dylan’s “personal and aesthetic stance” as “an interaction between two personae: that of the prophet and that of the trickster” (26). A number of critics have attempted to focus on the prophet persona, and Scobie shrewdly undercuts what is really a residual effect of Dylan’s early crowning as the voice of his generation in the 1960s by acknowledging the necessity of a disruptive force in order to even give credence to the prophet label. Put simply in terms of

archetype, as Scobie does, “The prophet proclaims the truth; the trickster tells lies” (34). Essentially, this interplay of personae represents the dialectic of law and outlaw. Also, if we are to accept the prophet-trickster dialectic in Dylan’s performance and work, in more general terms this can be viewed as Dylan’s emphasis on *seeking* (not proclaiming) truth by way of an outlaw mode of existence or thought. Clearly, though, for an artist who claims to accept chaos, the outlaw/trickster element is paramount.

In “All Along the Watchtower,” Dylan presents a dialogue between the two key archetypal personae that form his cultural outlaw, the joker and the thief (Scobie sees this as a symbolic dialogue between two aspects of the trickster figure). It’s an ironic dialogue in which their archetypal roles are partially reversed, and the song also presents these two figures as the underlying authority of culture, that which creates out of the chaotic, like the trickster figure. In the opening verse, the joker, in an exasperated tone, tells the thief, “There must be some kind of way out of here . . . There’s too much confusion, I can’t get no relief. / Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth, / None of them along the line know what any of it is worth” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 252). The joker bemoans the lack of honesty, here the non-recognition of worth, in society. The thief answers in the next verse, telling the joker to not get excited, “There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke. / But you and I, we’ve been through that, and this is not our fate, / So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 252). Thus, the thief and joker shift roles as the joker complains about cultural theft and the thief reassures the joker that society is a joke. The narrative shifts to a scene on a watchtower, representing high society, where “princes kept the

view,” and “Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl, / Two riders were approaching, the wind began to howl (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 252). While many critics have noted that the song is cyclical—the two riders are the joker and the thief—and Dylan has commented that the last verse is essentially the beginning, the drama is more specifically contemporaneous, depicting an impending dialectic between the outlaw and society. It’s a prelude of sorts to the implied dialectic in “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” or “Like a Rolling Stone,” particularly with the image of the princes along the watchtower echoing the princess in the steeple of the latter song. The two riders in the distance are the harbingers of truth—the thief advises the joker not to talk falsely, after all—and thus “All Along the Watchtower” presents yet another parable in which the outlaw figure is positioned outside to promote self-honesty.

In “Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts” (another song in which royal allusions are used) from *Blood on the Tracks* (1974), Dylan presents the Jack of Hearts in the self-evaluative role of the outlaw. The Jack of Hearts is also a trickster figure, not only because he is a one-eyed jack (traditionally, only half of his face is exposed), but also in Dylan’s allusion to the Magician in the Rider-Waite Tarot deck, which depicts the Magician with lilies (Lily) and roses (Rosemary) at his feet. Additionally, the other main characters represent both royal and Tarot card figures: Lily (princess; The High Priestess), Rosemary (queen; The Empress), and Big Jim (king; The Emperor). The self-evaluative outlaw role is embodied simply in the gaze and presence of the Jack of Hearts, who initially appears “standin’ in the doorway,” a trickster threshold position,

and essentially remains on the fringes, speaking only two brief sentences in the sixteen verse song:

He moved across the mirrored room, “Set it up for everyone,” he said

Then everyone commenced to do what they were doin’ before they turned their  
heads

Then he walked up to a stranger and he asked him with a grin

“Could you kindly tell me, friend, what time the show begins?”

Then he moved into the corner, face down like the Jack of Hearts. (*Lyrics 1962-1985 364*)

Fourteen verses later, the bank has been robbed, Rosemary is standing on the gallows for stabbing her husband, Big Jim, Lily is left to contemplate her life, and the Jack of Hearts has disappeared.

Upon completion of this saga, suddenly the Jack of Hearts’ few words, which at first seem inconsequential, carry more weight. He is the mastermind of the tale, the silent narrator/director who calls “action” or “set it up for everyone,” getting the crowd’s attention and then removes himself to the role of spectator, yet invisible, for he is face down. What follows is a process of self-evaluation for Lily and Rosemary, suggested by the symbolism of the “mirrored room” as well as Dylan’s stressing of image and role. Rosemary looks “like a queen without a crown” and “flutter[s] her false eyelashes” (*Lyrics 1962-1985 364*). Lily, presumably younger than Rosemary, “was a princess . . . fair-skinned and precious as a child . . . did whatever she had to do . . . had that certain flash every time she smiled” (*Lyrics 1962-1985 364*). In essence, these characters



present themselves falsely, hiding who they are or what they want, but in the presence of the Jack of Hearts they begin to be honest to themselves: “Rosemary started drinkin’ hard and seein’ her reflection in the knife / She was tired of the attention, tired of playin’ the role of Big Jim’s wife,” and Lily, who is Big Jim’s mistress, locks her arms around the man she really loves, the Jack of Hearts (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 365). The two men in their lives, Big Jim, the rich man who ran the town, and the Jack of Hearts, the outlaw whose gang is robbing the town bank, represent falsity and honesty, respectively. Big Jim resembles the glitz of the diamonds his mine produces, “lookin’ so dandy and so fine / With his body guards and silver cane and every hair in place” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 364). The Jack of Hearts is essentially invisible, in the way the subject of “Like a Rolling Stone” is invisible—the outlaw stripped of all the empty flash that Big Jim represents. In the end, both women—finally honest with themselves—choose the Jack of Hearts. The fluttering of Rosemary’s “false eyelashes” are replaced with unblinking eyes as she stands on the gallows and Lily has “taken all of the dye out of her hair” as she thinks about “her father . . . Rosemary . . . the law / But most of all . . . the Jack of Hearts” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 366).

“Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts” is one of Dylan’s most cinematic compositions, a mode of composition he dabbled in with “Chimes of Freedom” and continued to develop with the help of playwrights Jacques Levy (on *Desire*) and Sam Shepard (“Brownsville Girl”). Perhaps what inspired him to write such a cinematic outlaw ballad was his writing the soundtrack for and playing a role in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, in which the character he plays is an outlaw observer on the fringes of

scenes. In the beginning of the movie, somewhat surreally because it's doubtful the script was altered to allude to Dylan, who's not even in the scene, there's a not-so-subtle Dylan evocation. Billy, the outlaw, asks Garrett, his friend and newly-sworn sheriff, "How does it feel?" Garrett replies, "It feels like times have changed." Thus, Dylan's (non)presence in the movie positions him in a similar role to his Jack of Hearts. "Who are you?" asks Garrett of this silent observer. "That's a good question," replies Dylan as Alias without answering the question, as if the question is reflected back on the conflicted character of the former outlaw-turned-lawman Garrett. Fittingly, Dylan's character works for the Lincoln newspaper before he discards his printer's apron to follow the Kid. As the observer of the Kid's tale, Dylan's commentary appears in the soundtrack, particularly in "Billy," the Billy the Kid ballad Dylan wrote for the movie. In what, again, appears to be another "classic" outlaw ballad, reminiscent of Rev. Jenkins' Kid ballad, Dylan improvises on the form. The speaker, as observer, addresses Billy directly:

There's guns across the river aimin' at ya  
Lawman on your trail, he'd like to catch ya  
Bounty hunters, too, they'd like to get ya  
Billy, they don't like you to be so free. (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 335)

In the ballad, Dylan emphasizes Billy's free, but forever unsettled, existence, suggesting that the freedom that the Kid and his myth represent is what threatens society more than what the Kid has actually done. Billy exists in a liminal space "so far away from home" that's constantly threatened by the settled world:

There's eyes behind the mirrors in empty places

Bullet holes and scars between the spaces

There's always one more notch and ten more paces

Billy and you're walkin' all alone. (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 335)

It's an ironic freedom/placelessness in which Billy exists. At every turn there's a threat to his freedom because of who he is as a cultural figure. Thus, because of his legend his freedom affords no real peace, "There's always some new stranger sneakin' glances / Some trigger-happy fool willin' to take chances" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 335). And of course, there's the imminent betrayal with which Dylan is so preoccupied: "Billy, don't it make you feels so low-down / To be shot down by the man who was your friend" (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 335).

Dylan has not expressed much enthusiasm for his role in the movie—"there wasn't any dimension to it and I was very uncomfortable in this non-role"—but the role was consistent with his depiction of the outlaw throughout his career (*Biograph* 21). In retrospect, Dylan says he did the movie because "I guess I had a fondness for Billy the Kid" (*Biograph* 21). Dylan apparently had more than a fondness for the Kid. As Heylin notes, before the opening show of Dylan's big comeback tour in 1974 (his last tour was in 1966), Dylan, in his tour journal, "observed that he had outlived both Billy the Kid and Jesus, two of his favorite outlaws, but that it had taken its toll" (Heylin 360). Dylan's treatment of Billy the Kid as more of a cultural outlaw with whom he could identify than just a classic or an archetypal outlaw marks Dylan's increasing

commentary on cultural outlaws by way of the archetypal figure, evident in “Joey” and “Hurricane” from *Desire* (1975).

There’s no doubt that Joey Gallo was an outlaw, “always on the outside of whatever side there was,” but Dylan and Levy—who co-wrote the song—present him as a good man outside the law (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 383). Despite his illegal activities, he displays a morality that sets him apart from common criminals: Joey tells an accomplice, who suggests murdering hostages, “We’re not those kind of men,” he refuses to carry gun because he’s “around too many children,” and before he is finally gunned down in a clam bar in New York, he turns his table over to protect his family (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 383, 384). Dylan, well-aware of Gallo’s history, saw something more archetypal in his cultural role, as he comments,

I never considered him a gangster, I always thought of him as some kind of hero in some kind of way. An underdog fighting against the elements. He retained a certain amount of his freedom and he went out the way he had to. But she [Marty Orbach, a friend of Gallo’s] laid all these facts out and it was like listening to a story about Billy the Kid so we went ahead and wrote that up in one night.”

(Sloman 54).

It wasn’t just that Gallo was an outlaw type. There was something about his character as an archetype that differentiated him from someone like Al Capone. In *Chronicles*, Dylan explains how he differentiates between someone like Capone and Pretty Boy Floyd: “It probably has something to do with a character being fair and honest and open. Bravery in an abstract way” (39). Al Capone may have been a successful gangster and cultural

figure, but no one ever wrote a song about him. “He’s not interesting or heroic in any kind of way. . . . seems like a man who never got out alone in nature for a minute in his life,” says Dylan (*Chronicles* 39). “Pretty Boy Floyd, on the other hand, stirs up an adventurous spirit. . . . There’s something unbound and not frozen in the muck about him. . . . he’s the stuff of real flesh and blood, represents humanity in general and gives you an impression of power” (*Chronicles* 39). Again, it’s clear that Dylan isn’t interested in the historic version of these figures, but the feeling they invoke in the individual, and here, Dylan gives us a sense of how his perception of the outlaw reflects his own feeling; how he can relate to the outlaw role.

Dylan and Levy portray Joey Gallo’s role in a manner that symbolizes the tension between the individual and the collective, noting that he read Nietzsche and William Reich during his ten years in Attica. Following this juxtaposition of existentialist and Marxist theories, the problem of the collective denying individuality is suggested in Joey’s closest friends in prison being black men “‘cause they seemed to understand / What it’s like to be in society with a shackle on your hand” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 383). Dylan elaborates on this point further in “Hurricane”—the story of boxer Rubin Carter, for which Dylan, likewise, doesn’t exactly rely on historical fact. In Dylan and Levy’s portrayal of Carter there is an obvious element of the honest good man made outlaw by the oppression of the law, culminating in the final verse where all the prosperous criminals in coats and ties are enjoying their freedom while “Rubin sits like Buddha in a ten-foot cell” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 377). However, beyond this motif is the irony that Carter might have one day “been champion of the world,” which, in essence,

is the ultimate in individuality since there can only be one champion, but instead is treated as just another black man on the street who the law can pin a murder on. In fact, Carter is so alienated/outlawed by societal forces that in addition to being viewed as a “revolutionary bum” by whites, even to the “black folks he was just a crazy nigger” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 377).

By 1981, Dylan shifts his examination of the outlaw figure specifically to a cultural figure/performer in “Lenny Bruce.” As Scobie notes, “Dylan assimilates the figure of the artist to the figure of the outlaw, the trickster as thief. What Dylan values in Bruce is his clear insight, his uncompromising honesty, and the way he compelled his audience to look at themselves with similar insight and honesty” (136). Clearly, Bruce is depicted as an outlaw who promotes self-evaluation. Dylan outlaw epitaph for Bruce might seem strange in the context of *Shot of Love* (1981)—the final album of Dylan’s Christian period—but it makes perfect sense if we consider the role of Dylan’s outlaw, which Bruce represents. Dylan, who was subjected to much criticism for his shift to Christian music, could identify with the type of public persecution or homogenous commoditization Bruce had to deal with: “They said he was sick ‘cause he didn’t play by the rules . . . they just stamped him and they labeled him like they do with pants and shirts” (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 455). Beyond Dylan’s possible identification with Bruce, the outlaw qualities Bruce displays—“he sure told the truth . . . took the folks in high places and he shined a light in their beds”—are qualities that Dylan’s ideal honest outlaw possesses. It is the same role the speaker of “Like a Rolling Stone” occupies, telling people something they didn’t know or refuse to see by turning their heads.

Po' Boy, Where You Been?: The Outlaw Spending Time Out of Mind in the Tempest of Modern Times

When I was a little kid in La Jolla, California, which is a very small town, we had a parade on the 4th of July and I remember clearly the sight of Civil War veterans marching down the main street, kicking up the dust. The first time I heard Bob Dylan, it brought back that memory. And I thought of him as something of a Civil War type. A kind of 19th century troubadour. A maverick American spirit. The reediness of his voice and the spareness of his words go straight to the heart of America. (48)

So begins Gregory Peck's speech at the 1997 Kennedy Center Honors where Bob Dylan was recognized for his lifetime contributions to American culture through the performing arts. The award capped a rather eventful year for Dylan: in May he was hospitalized with a rare heart disease, in late September he performed for Pope John Paul II, and, days later, he released *Time Out of Mind*—to much critical acclaim—which was his first album of original songs in seven years. It's perhaps Dylan's most placeless album to date—it is after all, *Time Out of Mind*, a phrase that signals a mythic nowhere outside the law, a shadowy tradition with no distinct origin. Greil Marcus describes the album's milieu: "Images of homelessness and endless wandering drive song after song. Sometimes that motif suggests a man who doesn't want a home" (*Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus* 211). For Marcus, when one hears *Time Out of Mind* "another country comes into view. It's less the island of one man's broken heart than a sort of half-world, a

devastated, abandoned landscape where anyone might end up at any time” (*Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus* 211). Clearly, Poor Boy is still a long way from home.

Gregory Peck, who played both the role of a quintessential post-WWII outlaw in *The Gunfighter* (1950) and the lawyer Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)—Finch being *the* symbol for steadfast integrity and honesty within a corrupt social and legal system—couldn’t have been a better choice to provide commentary on Dylan’s career. Aside from the archetypal roles that Peck had played which speak to Dylan’s honest man outlaw role, there was the fact that Dylan so memorably invoked Peck’s role in *The Gunfighter* in “Brownsville Girl” (released in 1986 on *Knocked Out Loaded*). Peck and his role appear in five of the seventeen verses (accompanied by four choruses). The final verse before the last chorus not only offers, once again, Dylan’s interest in the outlaw and betrayal, but also the way the outlaw role serves as a place in which a narrative of self evaluation and homelessness can take place:

There was this movie I seen one time, I think I sat through it twice

I don’t remember who I was or where I was bound

All I remember about it was it starred Gregory Peck, he wore a gun and he was  
shot in the back

Seems like a long time ago, long before the stars were torn down. (*Lyrics 1962-2001* 512)

“Brownsville Girl” is a complicated narrative, fading in and out of the speaker’s memories that may or may not have happened. If they did happen, they’re colored by cinematic conventions, emphasizing the speaker’s outlaw sense of himself and the



imagination of his life as a mythic odyssey to nowhere, just to keep moving “‘til the wheels fall off and burn / ‘Til the sun peels the paint and the seat covers fade and the water moccasin dies” (*Lyrics 1962-2001* 511). Ironically, the speaker invents this epic narrative—spurred by the memory of Peck’s outlaw, Johnny Ringo, being shot in the back just when there’s a glimmer of hope that he can finally settle down with his estranged wife and son and the speaker’s nameless Brownsville Girl from a past he can’t let go of—as he’s “standin’ in line in the rain to see a movie starring Gregory Peck” (*Lyrics 1962-2001* 511). At one point, as he comes back to the memory of *The Gunfighter*, he imagines himself in the movie: “I can’t remember why I was in it or what part I was supposed to play / All I remember about it was Gregory Peck and the way people moved / And a lot of them seemed to be lookin’ my way” (*Lyrics 1962-2001* 511). Yet, after the chorus, the movie plot is not that of the Peck movie, but his own past rendered in cinematic conventions:

Well, they were looking for somebody with a pompadour

I was crossin’ the street when shots rang out

I didn’t know whether to duck or to run, so I ran

“We got him cornered in the churchyard,” I heard somebody shout (*Lyrics 1962-2001* 511)

The scene borders on cliché, a conventional mythic Western—the pompadour detail, however, complicates this wonderfully, placing the scene specifically in the context of the 1950s Western—although cleverly calling attention to itself as such in order to emphasize the necessity of searching beyond the surface of myth, just as the slaughtered

platitudes of *John Wesley Harding* reinvigorate conventional wisdom. In fact, the speaker catches himself relying on convention to express what he's feeling: "I've always been the kind of person that doesn't like to trespass but sometimes you just find yourself over the line / Oh if there's an original thought out there, I could use it right now" (*Lyrics 1962-2001* 511). As a result, he begins to complicate even the simplest convention of saying he feels good, "but that ain't sayin' much. I could feel a whole lot better" (*Lyrics 1962-2001* 511). In the end, the speaker recognizes the personal truth beyond the lie of convention with no regrets.

Implicitly, underneath the multiple layers of "Brownsville Girl" is an interplay of the three roles that Dylan's persona and those of his cultural outlaws represent: the individual (the narrator), popular culture (Peck), and myth (the outlaw). Sam Shepard's one-act play/interview with Dylan, *True Dylan* (aka *A Short Life of Trouble*) (1987), further explores these layers in a similar manner. The conversation continually returns to James Dean and Bob's identification with Dean, just as "Brownsville Girl" returns to the connection between the narrator and Peck. Just how much of the dialogue between the two characters, Sam and Bob, actually took place is impossible to say, and within the play, both Sam and Bob tell each other to "make it up" (*A Short Life of Trouble* 185, 193). The relationship between "making it up"—the lie or cultural myth—and truth serving as two necessary poles of identity formation is central to the play.

There's something strange about the opening of Peck's speech that sounds similar to the cultural myths and memory explored in conjunction with the distinct cultural outlaw figures in "Brownsville Girl" and *True Dylan*. In *True Dylan*, the cultural

myth of James Dean's death in a car accident serves as a touchstone for Bob to explore his own identity. For Peck, a childhood memory of Civil War veterans marching on Independence Day finds expression in Dylan's role as a cultural outlaw, who in performance and persona expresses something integral to understanding American identity. Peck sensed something about Dylan's work that Dylan describes in *Chronicles*:

There was a broad spectrum and common wealth that I was living upon, and the basic psychology of that life was every bit a part of it, you could see the full complexity of human nature. Back there, America was put on the cross, died and was resurrected. There was nothing synthetic about it. The godawful truth of that would be the all-encompassing template behind everything that I would write.

(86)

The "back there" Dylan is referring to is the Civil War. In the 2003 movie *Masked and Anonymous*, written by Dylan (with Larry Charles), Dylan dramatizes this template, playing a cultural outlaw performer named Jack Fate who is released from jail in order to perform a benefit concert within the context of a fictional modern America on the verge of Civil War. In the end, Fate is framed for murdering a journalist with Blind Lemon Jefferson's guitar—a symbol of the old, weird America disrupting mainstream culture if there ever was one—and the final scene shows Fate being transported back to prison. The camera never leaves Fate's face as he wryly half smiles. A recent live performance of "Blowin' in the Wind" begins to play, and Fate delivers a final voice-over:

I was always a singer and maybe no more than that. Sometimes it's not enough to know the meaning of things, sometimes we have to know what things don't mean

as well. . . . Things fall apart, especially all the neat order or rules and laws. . . .

Truth and beauty are in the eye of the beholder. I stopped trying to figure everything out a long time ago. (*Masked and Anonymous*)

Clearly, at this point, it's nearly impossible to separate Bob Dylan from Jack Fate. In fact, Jack Fate is simply another iteration of the Bob Dylan persona as cultural outlaw, and this statement serves as a summation of what Dylan's honest man outlaw has become over the years.

What happens to the honest man outlaw after five decades of traversing outlaw territory on the way to some deep sense of home? He is no longer the "blue-eyed son" or "darling young one" who stumbled on mountains and crawled down crooked highways, bearing witness to the dark underbelly of the American society. The young, earnest pilgrim journeying into outlaw territory becomes another aloof, disconnected Poor Boy (*Lyrics 1962-1985* 60). Ask him "where have you been" fifty years later and Dylan's Po' Boy brushes off the question: "I already tol' you—won't tell you again" (*Lyrics 1962-2001* 595). Since *Time Out of Mind*, and up to his latest release, *Tempest* (2012), there's a world weariness and increasingly violent edge to his songs, as if they're written from the perspective of an outlaw who has witnessed so much bare truth in his life that he resigns himself to the chaos of it all.

This resignation to and embrace of the chaotic, violence, mystery, and the unanswerable, however, isn't an evasion of responsibility. Assuming the role of Alias—to be a complete unknown—may appear to be a performative evasion, a way to remove oneself from a corrupt world in order to secure freedom of expression. But recall

Dylan's explanation of transfiguration, which is another way to express the cultural role of Alias, the honest outlaw, and reveals a much deeper dimension to the role beneath the surface of cultural myth: it's "what allows you to crawl out from under the chaos and fly above it. That's how I can still do what I do and write the songs I sing and just keep on moving" (Gilmore 46). Discussing his film *Renaldo and Clara* in 1978, Dylan describes the role of Bob Dylan as cultural myth in a similar way: "The persona of Bob Dylan is in the movie so we could get rid of it. There should no longer be any mystery as to who or what he is—he's there, speaking in all kinds of tongues, and there's someone else claiming to be him, so he's covered" (Cott 219). By discarding the static identity of the cultural figure and embracing the paradoxical anonymity of such a role, true and honest expression can take place.

There's a significant irony in Dylan's presentation of outlaw figures as Aliases, complete unknowns, whose cultural identities are so recognizable, including his own evasion of static identity. Billy the Kid, John Wesley Hardin, Joey Gallo, James Dean, Gregory Peck, Bob Dylan: their individual identities are emptied by cultural myth, made Aliases, in Dylan's work and mythology. To what end? What popular culture and many critics have mistaken as something like indifference in Dylan's persona or, conversely, have placed upon him a social responsibility he's never claimed predicated on his cultural identity, has never been contingent on who or what he is, but on his performative expression and what these cultural Aliases express. "You must be vulnerable to be sensitive to reality," explains Dylan in 1978. "And to me being vulnerable is just another way of saying that one has nothing more to lose" (Cott 180).

The key to understanding Dylan and the honest outlaw he presents is to partake in the struggle to recognize the “godawful truth” below the surface of cultural myths, a struggle that finds its clearest expression when there’s nothing left to lose. Dylan’s cultural role embodies the underlying struggle of coming to terms with the contradictions in American identity, “mak[ing] plain,” as Guthrie characterizes his ideal American troubadour, “what a big and terrible spirit he has learned to live in” (*Born to Win* 127).

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

There's always been something hidden in plain sight when it comes to the outlaw figure as cultural myth: its cultural appeal is predicated upon that which we reject as a civilized society. It's this central fact that informs and provides the cultural force to the outlaw roles Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan perform. The exotic bad outlaw role Lead Belly represented to an urban bourgeoisie audience, the good outlaw role Guthrie shaped to reflect the social concerns of the marginalized people he represented, and Bob Dylan's honest outlaw role of promoting clear-sighted self-evaluation: these performed roles originate in cultural and social rejection. Their culturally disruptive force calls attention to this rejection covertly by improvising on tradition (or convention), that which is culturally or socially acceptable. By virtue of their outlaw personae, they recognize that the outlaw figure itself is a performance; that there is an inextricable relationship or negotiation between the outlaw and society, both in terms of performer and audience *and* in the attempt to effect a result through a successful performative expression. Because this performance takes place on the social and cultural scale and because the outlaw and society (law) are interdependent in terms of definition, it's also a self-reflexive performance, a running commentary and critique of both the outlaw (performer) and society (audience) that reflects the times. Lead Belly, Guthrie, and Dylan demonstrate the shifts in the outlaw's cultural role over different generations while also expressing, by continuing a rooted tradition, essential qualities of

the outlaw figure that remain constant. Their outlaw performances remind us what it means to be, at root, an outlaw and how essential outlawry is to understanding society and culture, recognizing the inextricable *a part of* and *apart from* relationship.

As a culture, we make use of the outlaw role in order to fulfill our needs, capitalizing on the aspects of this form that are most desirable and beneficial at different times and dismissing the rest. We hold the essential meaning of what an outlaw is at our disposal without really acknowledging it. Instead, it exists under the surface of American culture and society as a repressed source of disruptive possibility, a culturally recognizable tradition to draw upon which we simultaneously claim and exclude. It's the old, weird America, and when it does manifest, the results can be unsettling and/or appealing. It's the uncanny effect of a sense of otherness that can't be repudiated, the Glory and Nowhere of the American Dream. Without the presence of the essential meaning of being an outlaw the figure's roots are lost and its cultural force emaciated. Culturally effective outlaws can never settle, but must always be a long ways from some mythical home. As Lead Belly sings,

If anybody should come along and ask you, good people,

Who composed this song,

Tell 'em it Huddie Ledbetter,

He's done been here an' gone,

He's a-lookin' for a home. (*Negro Sinful Songs*)

Or in Guthrie's words,

I ain't got no home,



I'm just a-roamin' 'round,

Just a wand'rin' worker, I go from town to town.

And the police make it hard

Wherever I may go,

And I ain't got no home in this world anymore. (*The Woody Guthrie Songbook*

137-38)

Or as Dylan sings,

How does it feel

How does it feel

To be without a home

Like a complete unknown

Like a rolling stone? (*Lyrics, 1962-1985* 191)

They're not only giving performative expression to what it means to be an outlaw but also, through the cultural force of this expression, prompting a self-reflexive critique that marks an unsettling social "lack of," an alienating absence of something essential, a long way from home.

Sometimes, oftentimes, this "lack of" goes undetected, and we make heroes or national treasures of our outlaws or turn this lack into a romantic ideal, making them socially acceptable and subconsciously repressing the essential social lack, thereby recognizing the relationship between the outlaw and society, but only in positive terms. Recall the *March of Time* newsreel and its juxtaposition of Lead Belly's recordings and the *Declaration of Independence* by virtue of suggesting they're both housed in the

Library of Congress. Or think about how many children have learned “This Land Is Your Land,” except only the celebratory verses, in elementary school since the 1960s. Making heroes out of outlaws only recognizes the socially acceptable part of the outlaw, the part that we shape into roles which reveal more about ourselves than the outlaw. In fact, this process demonstrates culture’s performative investment in the outlaw figure, how inextricable the negotiation between performer and audience is.

Understanding this interdependence is important even if, as a culture, we don’t always realize it. In general, studies that have attempted to make sense of this cultural process, whether their scope has been concerned with historical, cultural, or social outlaws, have focused primarily on the heroic side of the outlaw, how we make them into heroes. The best of these studies recognize the ambivalence of the outlaw figure as well as the incongruity between the actual or historic person’s life or deeds and the mythic tales associated with them. Again, this is important, but too often, the critical impulse is either to debunk or discredit the myth. By doing so, the essential meaning, the root of the myth, is severed as well as the performative relationship in the enactment of the myth. Thus, while we recognize and accept the aspects of the outlaw figure that are culturally appealing—that which we find heroic—we lose a deeper understanding of the traits we deny—the unheroic or socially unacceptable—which are integral to what it means to be an outlaw. Without accepting this we are likewise denying something about ourselves. What’s essential, and what has been an underlying premise of this study, is recognizing what it means to be an outlaw and accepting the figure’s darker side as the very source that makes possible those outlaw traits we vicariously seek. Understanding

the outlaw in terms of performance and its implied relationship makes it clear that, as the audience, we have just as much at stake, both good and bad, in the outlaw's performance. It makes us face what we don't know about ourselves or choose to ignore: our own desiccated body of Homer Baron locked away in the tradition and hereditary obligation of Miss Emily's home.

Creativity, social/cultural worth, power, and, overall, freedom: these are the positive aspects of the outlaw tradition highlighted in this study. That these are all appealing aspects is obvious, but what's not obvious or recognized is why they are idealized traits we vicariously seek in the outlaw. Why not look for these in more socially acceptable figures? The answer lies not just in what we aspire to, but also in the root of that aspiration. It's the negative aspects of the outlaw, the general "lack of," that compels this aspiration. A sense of alienation, loneliness, unsettledness, feeling socially powerless and constricted: these form the root of the outlaw tradition and its appeal. The outlaw's violence is the performance of the potential to disrupt social conventions that exclude us or the status quo that bogs us down.

In a way, we subconsciously alienate or repress that which is alienating about our connection to the outlaw. We see this process in Woody Guthrie's exploration of the myth. Guthrie understands the necessity of recognizing and even making use of the violence and alienation of the outlaw figure, but he attempts to distort it in order to make it correspond to his social good man conception of the myth. For instance, to return to the questions that began this study, Guthrie anatomizes the outlaw myth by beginning with consideration of the would-be outlaw performer, like John Hardy or Jesse James,

and attempts to get at the root of the meaning by asking: “What is an outlaw? A person that breaks the law? There’s lots of laws, too many. The world is full of laws and the jails are full of people” (*Pastures of Plenty* 79). He then proceeds to question the process of dramatization that occurs between the performer and audience: “Why do people set down and write up great songs and ballads about their outlaws?” (*Pastures of Plenty* 79-80) In attempting to answer these questions, Guthrie concludes that what’s appealing about the outlaw is that he takes action, tries to change the status quo. This is where Guthrie begins distorting the violent impulse that makes this action possible. The outlaw has “the right idea but . . . the wrong system [i.e. the individual violent act]” (*Hard Hitting Songs* 114). Instead, Guthrie co-opts the violent impulse necessary for action and translates it to musical expression and collective action. Despite this distortion, however, Guthrie never completely represses the implied violence behind the act. Hence the slogan painted on his guitar: “This machine kills fascists.” The translation of this violent impulse and the unsettling, uncanny feelings of alienation that perhaps give rise to this impulse into cultural expression provides the performative force of folk outlaw performers like Guthrie, Dylan, and Lead Belly. This is why the outlaw figure has been such a consistent cultural myth for over a century, and why performers like these are able to tell us something about ourselves we didn’t know or choose not to recognize.

As we move from Lead Belly to Guthrie to Dylan as outlaw performers, we uncover, through examining the performative act, what’s integral to the outlaw’s cultural role, the key to understanding our relationship to the outlaw over time. In one sense, it’s an understanding of what it means to be an outlaw, expressed as a social lack or

alienation. Lead Belly is the exotic bad outlaw, the intriguing outsider, who offers his urban bourgeoisie audience an entertaining contrast to the conventional goodness of their lives, appealing to the core of discontent and alienation that they seem unable to either deny or embrace. With Guthrie, you get the good outlaw that, against the background provided by examples like Lead Belly and the old, weird America, performs a version of outlawry that appeals to the guilty conscience of a similar audience. In both of these cases, the outlaw performs a role as a perceived source of authenticity—the Murderous Minstrel and the Dustiest of the Dust Bowlers—which both expresses the audience's felt alienation while also distancing that feeling because the performers are viewed as outsiders. With Dylan, all pretense of a real historical connection with outlawry yields to an honesty that asks you to look inside yourself and grasp your essential alienation and admit the violence and disgust, for which the old outlaw figures have become primarily a metaphor. It's in Dylan that we get an even deeper sense of the key to understanding our relationship to the outlaw through performance: honesty. This goes beyond representing alienation that may be felt by performer and audience as in the cases of Lead Belly and Guthrie, where the audience still essentially remains spectators. Honesty prompts the audience to participate in the performance, thereby emphasizing the shared performative role and bringing them closer to understanding what it means to be an outlaw because they must invest themselves in the role.

This is not to say, however, that honesty is not a factor in Lead Belly's and Guthrie's *performance*. Alan Lomax describes Lead Belly as “the performer everyone thought of when they want honesty, authenticity and power” (Reynolds and Robinson

13). Ramblin' Jack Elliot remembers Guthrie's unflinching honesty, which could prove unsettling to an audience that was more interested in the outlaw role rather than the honesty that made it possible: "Woody was too honest, too real, for people to tolerate. They wanted things sugared-up. Woody wouldn't do that" (Cray 400). Dylan conceptualized what was essential to the roles they played, what was inherent in their performance of the outlaw role: the honesty of the outlaw performer's expression.

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